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HANK HOUND, The Crescent City Detective; Or, THE OWLS OF NEW ORLEANS.

A STRANGE LIFE DRAMA OF THE GREAT CITY OF THE SOUTH.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "JACK SIMONS, DETECTIVE," "THE MAN SPIDER," "THE MAN OF STEEL," ETC., ETC., ETC.



A CRY THAT WAS A SHRIEK BROKE FROM HIS LIPS. HE ESSAYED TO LEAP FROM THE BED, BUT, ERE HE COULD RELIEVE HIMSELF OF THE COVERS THE NONDESCRIT GRAPPLED HIM, AND THE KNIFE FLASHED.

Hank Hound,

The Crescent City Detective;

OR,

THE OWLS OF NEW ORLEANS.

A Strange Life Drama of the Great
City of the South.

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CHAPTER I. A MYSTERY.

THE packet from St. Louis had just arrived. Among the busy throng on the levee were two men who had watched the passengers landing with eyes keenly alert.

One was rough-clad and bearded; the other seemingly a gentleman of fashion whose appearance indicated that he had prepared an elaborate toilet for a special occasion.

Presently, he of the fine cloth grasped his companion's arm.

"There she is. Punctual, by Jove!"

"A purty gal."

"A stunner, truly."

"You were right, Cap."

"How?"

"They're both alike."

"Oh, that was settled in my mind long ago."

"An' now for the stakes."

"Big stakes, too, eh, Billy—"

"She's movin'. Go for 'er!"

"Be ready at the spot I showed you."

"Don't you worry."

Coming forward, seemingly bewildered by the confusion of noises and bustling people about her, was a beautiful young girl.

She had drawn aside her veil, revealing a sweet face with melting, trustful dark eyes—eyes that glanced a little timidly here and there, as if seeking some one.

"Pardon—but is not this Miss Edna Crystol?"

She looked up at the dashing handsome young gentleman who addressed her.

The face she scrutinized was full of pleasant smiling that would have disarmed suspicion, even had she not been anticipating this very occurrence.

"Yes, that is my name."

"Ah! I thought I could not be mistaken, having seen the picture you sent to your prospective guardian, Mr. Ardway. Permit me to introduce myself."

He proffered a dainty card, and while she looked at the name upon it, gallantly relieved her of the rather heavy sachel she was carrying.

The name on the card was Percy Desmond.

"You come from my guardian, Mr. Desmond?"

"Yes; I was deputed to meet you. Mr. Ardway could not come himself, owing to a pressing business engagement at this very hour."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance," she said, extending a tiny gloved hand, which he pressed respectfully.

"We shall meet your guardian at the hotel."

"The hotel?" surprisedly.

"Yes."

"Why not go at once to the house that is to be my home?"

"He would prefer meeting you at the hotel. Besides, we have to stop for Mr. Margrip, the lawyer, on our way. You know Margrip?"

"Oh, yes. It was he who discovered my whereabouts in St. Louis and first told me of the happy turn in my affairs."

"Exactly. Let me be your escort."

"And thank you, for you must know I am an entire stranger here. Do we take this cab?"

"Yes. Step in, please."

They had been walking somewhat briskly during the brief dialogue.

Desmond now paused before a cab, the driver of which appeared to be there by engagement, for the door was promptly opened to admit them. "St. Charles," was the brief instruction to "cabby."

The vehicle was driven rapidly away.

Desmond's conversation became so delightfully engaging that she scarcely noticed the route they were pursuing; and even if she had, there were no indications to arouse suspicion of anything wrong, as all she saw was new and strange to her.

Presently the cab halted. The door was flung wide, and the bearded driver stood grimly silent, holding the plated knob.

Percy Desmond alighted.

"Do we get out here?" came the half timid inquiry.

"Yes."

"But this place is not a hotel."

He affected an amused laugh.

"I should hope not."

"Where are we? Why do we stop?"

As her glances took in the locality a misgiving seemed suddenly to enter her heart that all was not right.

And no wonder.

Unknown to her, she was then in Franklin street, not far from Canal!

On various sides could be seen the black faces of the negroes that supremely populate that quarter—the lazy lounge ready to steal or mayhap worse, the vicious bully with his thrice ugly phiz, the degraded belle loafing, arguing or quarreling with the groups she passed—these scattered standing idly or flitting in and out at the dingy doorway of a rum-shop near by.

"We are compelled to stop here for a business purpose, Miss Crystol."

"Business?—in this—"

"Have no fears. We must get the lawyer."

"The lawyer?"

"Margrip, you know."

"And does he live here?"

"Yes. This house looks better inside than out. You see, Mr. Margrip practices considerably in the criminal court. His clients are, principally, among the negroes, who are continually 'up' for brawls and other scrapes. He locates here for better convenience. Old Margrip places full value on all current money, soiled or not. Come, Miss Crystol, your guardian wishes you to have a conversation with Margrip, before the meeting at the St. Charles. He pops in and out of his office; the chances are he is not in at this minute. But it is advisable that you wait for him inside. We would attract vulgar curiosity remaining here in the cab."

Persuaded by his assurances, she descended.

Another fearful glance she cast upon the curious surrounding.

The house, it was true, had a much cleaner appearance than its neighbors, but, like the rest, was of forbidding aspect.

A sharp rap caused the door to open.

Edna took a step forward, then shrunk back from the ugly and muscular negress who had admitted them.

There was something so absolutely repulsive in the woman's visage that her heart gave a throb of fright.

The gloomy, bare entryway, with its dirt-smearred walls, belied Desmond's assertion that the building was better inside than out.

An infernal grin broke over the face of the negress.

"Yah! he's got you, so 'e has, honey!"

One of her long, brawn arms reached outward, with its fingers like vulture talons clawing to grasp.

With a cry, Edna Crystol turned to flee.

But the door banged shut.

The scream on her lips was smothered by a quick, rude hand; and Desmond laughed chillingly, in her ears:

"Caged! Caged, my beauty!"

Her senses reeled as she struggled violently in vain. She heard the dull sound of receding wheels, the chuckling snort of the huge negress who also fastened a painful grip on the frail form.

Then came the blackness of insensibility.

A bold, a startling deed had been consummated with this scene at the somber house on Franklin street.

It was the luncheon hour at the large retail dry-goods store of Haskel & Deal "up-town."

Many of the female clerks habitually carried their little dinner-baskets with them to the store; a few, living not far distant, availed of the convenient excuse to slip away and get a breath of fresh air.

Among the latter was a blue-veiled young girl who seemed to be in no hurry to reach her lodging.

Just as she turned a corner a bearded man stepped directly in her path—the same we have seen on the levee when the packet arrived.

"Day to you, miss!"

"What do you want?" demanded a musical but firm voice behind the veil.

"Oh, I don't want nothin', miss."

"Then why do you stop me?"

"I've got somethin' for you."

"What is it?"

He slyly drew forth a sealed envelope.

"Ah! for me?" she exclaimed, eagerly.

"Reckon it belongs to you. You know who it is from—hesaid you would."

"Yes, yes, let me have it," fairly snatching it from his grasp.

While she bestowed a momentary glance upon the superscription, the fellow lounged away from the corner.

"At last! At last!" fell in half-hushed excitement from her hidden lips.

Then, tucking the missive carefully into her pocket, she moved on again, now stepping briskly, as if with sudden buoyance of spirit.

When the dry-goods store of Haskel & Deal was busy with customers in the afternoon, and the employees, male and female, were at their various posts, there was one absent.

She of the blue veil had not returned.

"Where's Nell Deems?" asked one of the girls of her neighbor.

"Can't imagine, I'm sure."

"Why, she was here all this morning."

"Yes, I saw her go out at dinner-time."

"Taken sick, maybe. Poor girl!"

"Shouldn't be surprised."

After work hours the sympathetic young female called at Miss Deems's rooms to inquire after the health of her fellow-clerk.

She was not there. She had not been seen since starting out as usual in the morning.

"But she must have been at home to eat dinner?"

"La, no, miss," declared the landlady.

"And you don't know anything about her at all?"

"Not a thing, miss."

"Well, that's strange."

"Wasn't she at the store?"

"Not after dinner. Good-day, madam."

The landlady looked after her visitor, her eyes twinkling knowingly.

"I see how it is," she gabbled, to herself.

"Miss Deems was a smart and pretty girl, that's sure. She's eloped with somebody—gone off to be married and live somewhere else—that's it."

The absent one failed to put in an appearance at her counter next morning.

Further inquiry showed that she had not yet returned to her home.

Nell Deems had mysteriously and utterly vanished!

Standing in the office of the St. Charles Hotel was a gentleman perhaps forty years of age.

A man of well knit, lithely-muscular form, his face shaved cleanly as a woman's. His eyes were of grayish color, quickly bold, their glance, as if by no will of their owner, having a fixed shrewdness of expression, while open to politely meet the gaze of any one.

Harry Hound, a prominent and famous member of the New Orleans City Detective Police—though only having obtained his position a few years back—was known as "The Hound" to those who had cause to dread his reputation of never-failing success in hunting down a criminal, or familiarly as Hank Hound, by the fellows of the "Shadow Brigade."

He could assume any disguise to perfection. The daring burglar or sneaking thief feared, most of all men, the phantom presence and steel-veiled grip of "The Hound," for they never knew in what clever character he might be "shadowing" his game.

Harry appeared to have no special case on hand on the day of our story's opening. He was leisurely scanning a newspaper.

A close cab came wheeling around the corner at Gravier street, but to pause before the hotel, when a lady and gentleman alighted, entering the house together.

Within a few minutes the gentleman appeared at the counter, and registered a single name:

"MISS EDNA CRYSTOL, St. Louis."

"The young lady's baggage will not come to the hotel, as it is not likely that she will remain over night," he informed the clerk.

At sound of the voice Harry covertly glanced at the speaker.

"All right, sir," responded the clerk.

"And as she is expecting some visitors, she would like to have a private parlor."

"It shall be attended to."

When the gentleman had gone, Harry advanced and looked at the register.

"Edna Crystol?" he repeated lowly, reading the name. "Peculiar, and rather pretty. Wonder who she is, and what she is to that man?—Percy Desmond, alias 'The Prince,' as cheeky a specimen of an adventurer as I know of now in the city, yet with nothing actually 'crooked' about him, as far as can be—"

"Hello, Harry!"

At the detective's elbow was an energetic knight of the pencil—Trimble Taskar, a reporter on the *Picayune*.

The two were well acquainted.

"How are you, Trim? What are you driving after now?"

"Hotel arrivals first, and then—" opening his tablets and copying with almost lightning rapidity from the register.

"Well, and then what?"

"A sensation if I can find one. Can't you help a fellow with an 'ite'?"

"None on hand to give away, Trim."

"How is business with you, Harry?"

"Dull—quite dull just at present. Nothing special."

"Well, I wish you a big case and me into it."

"Thanks."

Harry Hound sauntered leisurely away from the hotel.

"I am fairly rusting for want of use," he muttered. "Just a little something to stir a fellow up would be refreshing, though it doesn't seem right to be wishing for crime to make employment."

At the agency all was quiet.

But The Hound was to have his wish gratified soon enough.

CHAPTER II.

BROWN AND BLACK EYES.

Two days had passed.

The telephone alarm-bell at the Detective Agency, St. Charles street, near Canal, was

sounding violently, with hardly any intermissions.

Harry Hound chanced to be sitting in the room where the instrument was, and immediately responded.

Prompt as he was the signal had rung forth several times.

"Well?" he called.

"Hello, there!"

"Hello yourself. What's up?"

"City Detective Agency?"

"Correct."

"An officer wanted at once."

"Where?"

"No. — Prytania street. Wanted without any delay."

"All right. Anything else?"

"Nothing. That will do."

"Good-by, then," said Harry, closing the connection.

"Looks like a job at last," he exclaimed, hopefully.

At that moment his chief entered.

He mentioned the message, concluding with:

"I would like to see what it is."

"Very well; but I hardly think it will be worth while for a man of your abilities."

"Why?"

"Oh, no doubt some trifling loss of silverware or some such commonplace."

"I want it, if there is no objection."

"Go ahead."

The Hound lost no time in reaching the wealthy and fashionable precinct of Prytania street.

As he approached No. —, he saw a handsomely dressed gentleman descending the steps of the house.

The two passed without apparently noticing one another.

It was the party we have seen figuring under the name of Percy Desmond, and whom we know, by the detective's muttering at the hotel, to be an adventurer known among the fraternity of sports as "The Prince."

"I wonder if that fellow is on visiting acquaintance at this house?" he queried, inwardly. "I must find out."

He was soon admitted to the rich interior of the residence, the massive door to which bore a gilded plate, having on it the name of Girard Ardway.

"Who shall I say has called?" asked the servant.

"Oh, no matter. Just say some one on important business, that's all."

In a few minutes the servant returned, with the request to walk up to the library.

The Hound was ushered into the presence of Girard Ardway—a gray-haired and portly gentleman, whose mien was impressive with the dignity of one who can carry the importance of wealth without its arrogance. He was a widower.

"Be seated," he said, pleasantly. Then: "I am glad you did not let any hint fall to the servant as to who you were, sir."

Harry smiled. It was not likely, if he was to be employed upon a case of detective service, that he would begin by revealing himself to gossiping servants, when the business might involve them especially.

He was thinking, as did his chief, that only some pilfering had been going on.

"What is your name?"

"Henry Hound."

"Ah! I am glad to hear it."

"Why, particularly?"

"Because I have heard of that name and its owner's exploits. It is popularly known in New Orleans—"

"Not popular with a great many, sir."

"No doubt, no doubt. Now, I have a case for you, Mr. Hound."

"Of what nature?"

"Something that will require the best skill I believe you to possess. It is no common affair."

The detective's ears pricked attentively at this.

"Please state the case."

"I will begin at the beginning—as some people say: In my younger years I had a very dear friend— Ah!"

He was interrupted by the library door opening.

In the doorway appeared, like a vision, a very beautiful young lady.

"Royal and I are going out for a drive, guardy," she said, musically, while busy fastening a tinted glove.

"Very well, my dear. I hope you will enjoy yourselves."

"I thought I would tell you, so that you would not miss me."

"Very proper, Edna. You have been with us such a little while, I feel as if I hardly yet had a firm hold upon you," the last playfully.

When the young lady had reclosed the door, Ardway asked, quickly:

"Did you look at her face?"

"Yes."

"You hardly seemed to."

"Oh, there is no need to stare impolitely at a person to impress the face on one's mind. A glance has always been sufficient for me."

"Then you would recognize her if you saw her again elsewhere?"

"Assuredly. But, why do you ask? Has that young lady anything to do with—"

"It will be explained by what I am about to tell you. As I was saying: I had a very dear friend. His name was Bernard Crystol. He married shortly after I did and went to Missouri to live; he had two children—they were girls and twins. Colonel Crystol's health failed him; he died. Some years ago, while traveling through that portion of Missouri, I made inquiries for Mrs. Crystol. The widow, too, was dead. The children were adopted by a lady living in St. Louis; I went to her address and found that she was dead, having left no property of any earthly value. Lucy, one of the children, had, I learned, run away from her benefactress when but a small child. The other child, whose name was Edna, had been lost sight of by those who had casually known her. For my old friend's sake, I resolved to find the surviving child—the other child being presumably dead—and adopt her as my ward if she consented. There is a lawyer in this city named Margrip—"

He paused as he observed a smile on the detective's face.

"You know him?"

"Who does not know him?"

A reasonable counter-question. There were few in New Orleans who did not know or had not heard of Silas Margrip, the miser lawyer, who boasted of more criminal clients of more varied scrapes than other brother professional.

"Well, it seems this old Margrip has efficient correspondents in St. Louis, for—to be brief—he found the child, Edna Crystol—"

"For which he made you pay roundly."

"Of course. I expected that. The sly fox loves money and knows how to charge. Edna received my proposition gladly, gratefully. She had been earning an uncertain livelihood by coloring photographs after the electrograph process. She sent me her picture, painted by herself. Here it is. Look at it, please."

He produced from his desk a cabinet-size photograph, colored to look like porcelain-type, handing it to The Hound.

"Now, Edna was to have arrived yesterday. Instead, she came on the day before yesterday, registered at the St. Charles, notified me of her presence there, came home at once with me and—that was she you saw at the door a moment ago."

The Hound had been contemplating the picture. He looked up with a start.

He recalled the incident at the St. Charles Hotel two days previous.

"I would like to ask you a question, Mr. Ardway."

"What is it?"

"As I came in I met a gentleman going out."

"Well?"

"An acquaintance of the family I take for granted. But, who is he?"

"Describe him."

"Medium height; a face possessing a great deal of self-assurance; dark, ample mustache neatly combed down; hard black eyes; wearing a fawn-colored overcoat and—"

"Oh, that is a particular friend of my son's—Charles Courtley is his name. He hails from Richmond, I believe, and is living on the interest of a splendid inheritance."

The detective could scarcely refrain from an outburst of laughter; but he asked, quite soberly:

"You are sure that is his name?"

"Why, yes."

"His face seemed familiar, that is all; a mere passing impression," noting the surprise his inquiry was causing.

Percy Desmond, then, was sailing under false representations in the wealthy circle surrounding Girard Ardway.

"Let me call your attention more particularly to that picture, Mr. Hound. There is something strange—"

"I have already noticed it."

"What?"

"Whoever painted those eyes intended them for brown."

"Evidently—yes," said Ardway, nodding.

"The eyes of the young lady whom I just saw and heard address you were more like a pair of black diamonds."

"You have hit it."

"Have I?"

"My son Royal and I have noticed the strange circumstance. At first we were inclined to attribute it to a mere mistake on the artist's part—"

"I do not think such a thing likely."

"Your reason?"

"Simple enough. A person painting their own picture would endeavor to be exact in the matter of hair and eyes above all things."

"What, then, do you make out of it?"

"That young lady is not the one this photo is meant to represent."

"Sh! Not so loud, please."

Ardway arose and went to the door. After casting a look out into the hallway, he returned to his seat, saying:

"Royal and I are yielding to the same suspicion. But we wish whatever is done to be

done quietly. We would not for worlds make any move which, eventually, would cause the young lady a needless wound."

"I comprehend."

"Still," Ardway added, whisperingly, "for satisfaction, in view of the circumstances, we must have proof beyond what we already have that she is or is not the person she is supposed to be."

The Hound was again studying the face of the picture.

It was very plain. The eyes were a peculiar blue-brown. The eyes of the Edna Crystol he had seen were jet-black.

Ardway waited for him to speak.

CHAPTER III.

A MISSING GIRL.

AFTER some minutes of silence the detective said:

"I understand you wish me to investigate upon your suspicions, Mr. Ardway?"

"Precisely."

"I will do so. This is all, is it?"

"No; I have something singular to communicate."

"In connection with this case?"

"Perhaps yes, though I have no good reason for supposing so."

"I should like to hear what it is."

"There is a young girl now in the city of New Orleans who is an exact counterpart of our Edna."

"Indeed! Some strong resemblance, eh?"

"By no means merely that. An exact counterpart, I say."

"Black eyes and all?"

"Yes, in every feature."

"Such a thing is rare."

"In this case it is a fact."

"Where is this young lady?"

"At the dry-goods store of Haskel & Deal."

"A clerk there?"

"Yes. One day last week, in anticipation of the arrival of my prospective ward, I went into that store to make some purchases. At one of the counters where I was waited upon was this girl. I had not then received the picture from Edna; when it arrived, its remarkable likeness to the girl at Haskel & Deal's struck me like a flash."

"I think I must have a look at her," observed The Hound, thoughtfully. "Have you any objections to my retaining this picture for a few days, Mr. Ardway?"

"None at all, sir."

"I suppose this circumstance of the different colored eyes is the only basis you can give me to work upon?"

"Positively that is all. Is it too frail a thread for you?"

"My dear sir, I have trapped and jailed many a criminal with a smaller starting-point than this," was the confident rejoinder.

When Harry Hound left the house of the retired merchant, his brain was working busily.

Prominent in his thoughts were the incident at the hotel, his knowledge of the true character of Percy Desmond, "The Prince," and his assumption of a false role in the charmed circle of higher society.

"It will take a few hours to think this out," he mused. "If there is really any devilry afoot I guess I know the man who needs shadowing. This Desmond is a bold fellow. It is no easy game to live under two names in the same city for a man who moves around much. But first, for a glimpse of Edna Crystol's counterpart. I feel an unaccountable interest in that direction."

He proceeded straightway to the store of Haskel & Deal.

After traversing the store, looking in vain for the face he sought—examining an article here and there with affected curiosity—he paused at a counter that seemed to be without a clerk.

In a few seconds he was confronted by a middle-aged woman with flaring red hair, cavernous smiles, but most equable manners.

"Can I wait upon you, sir?"

"Are you the regular clerk at this counter, miss?"

"No, this is Miss Deems's counter. But nobody knows where she is."

"A young lady?"

"Yes, about—" she checked herself.

Why should this stranger want to know so much about Miss Deems?

"Young and beautiful, too, is she not?"

Harry continued.

"She might be considered so."

"Is this the lady?"

He showed the picture.

"Nell Deems, for all the world!" instantly exclaimed the saleslady. Then, with a mysterious smile: "You are some relative of hers I presume, sir, or—"

"Yes, I am a cousin."

"You are looking particularly for her?"

"I am."

"Then I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Haven't you seen the morning's paper?"

"Not to read closely."

She slipped the paper from her pocket and

handed it to him, her finger indexing a certain paragraph in the personals.

It read thus:

"Nellie Deems will confer a favor upon anxious friends by advising them of her whereabouts. Address to landlady of her lodging-house."

He returned the paper.

"What does it mean?"

"Why, she's gone."

"Gone?"

"Vanished—yes."

"You don't tell me so!"

"Went home to dinner, day before yesterday, and hasn't been seen since."

"What was her address?"

This was given to him.

The saleslady was called away at that juncture and Harry Hound passed out of the store.

There was a peculiar, snappy twinkle in his eyes. A wonderful theory was entering his keen mind.

Theories chase one another rapidly in the brain of an experienced detective when opening into a fresh trail.

Hardly had he taken a dozen steps when he met Trim Taskar. The reporter was working under a pressure of some excitement.

"I've got it!" exclaimed Trim, abruptly.

"Bad?" laughed the detective.

"No, no, I don't mean that, but the sensation."

"Oh, yes; you were looking for a sensation when I last saw you. What is it, now?"

"A young lady—has disappeared from the face of the earth—friends advertising for her—beautiful victim—foul play, etc., etc. See? I've a big paragraph!"

"What was her name?"

"Nell Deems, they tell me; clerk in Haskel & Deal's dry goods—"

The detective's hand fell on the reporter's shoulder with an uncomfortable gripe, surprise at the action cutting short further utterance.

"You must keep this thing quiet, Trim."

"What do you mean? What's the matter?"

"There must not be any sensation about this in the *Picayune* or any other paper. Say nothing relative to Miss Deems's disappearance."

"Why, what are you talking about?" burst from the astonished reporter.

"I spoke pretty plainly, didn't I, Trim?"

"But, see here; sensations are my bread and butter. Besides, if I don't write it up, some other paper may, and the *Picayune* isn't in the habit of coming in second on news items."

"Keep this thing shady. You shall lose nothing—nor the paper either."

"Oh, I begin to see, you must be working on something concerning the girl."

"I am. I am now on my way to her lodging."

"I've just come from there. But all right, Hound; I'll be mum as a keg of nails."

"See that you are, Trim; it will pay you."

At the house where Nell Deems had lodged Harry Hound had a conversation with the landlady. He thought it advisable to continue representing himself as a cousin of the young lady's, just arrived in New Orleans and looking for her.

Mrs. Splubbs could give no more information than he had gained from the saleswoman.

"It is an unfortunate state of affairs," he remarked, regretfully.

"La, yes, sir, it's mightily strange of her, sure enough. But then, you know, pretty girls as has lovers—" she paused significantly.

"You think she has gone off and married somebody?"

"Yes, maybe—I can't say."

"And I feel sure she would not have gone without leaving some message for me. Have you looked about her room for such a thing?"

"La, sir, I wouldn't go into her room, when I'm not sure but she'll be back."

"Have you a key that will fit her door?"

"Yes, but then I wouldn't dare—"

"Oh, I'll take the responsibility. I am quite sure we will find a message there for me."

He had a curiosity to see the room of the young lady, about whom there appeared to be a deepening mystery.

Mrs. Splubbs led the way up-stairs. Entering the room occupied by Nell Deems, their search failed to be rewarded.

"Well, I do declare!" broke from the landlady.

"What is it, madam?"

"If she's run off to be married, she hasn't taken a stitch along."

This proved true. The trunk, neatly packed with snowy linen, was standing there untouched; the closet was filled with wearing-apparel, some of it such as no young girl would be apt to leave behind, even with good prospects in her flight.

"I am so sure there is a message for me," urged the dissembling detective, earnestly, "that I would suggest your searching the pockets of her dresses. She may have written a note and forgotten to place it where it could be found."

"If you'll bear witness to the honest motives, sir," she demurred.

"Certainly, madam."

He had an object in turning the landlady's attention away from himself.

No sooner was she at her investigation in the closet, than The Hound noiselessly stooped before the open fireplace.

Lying there was a small piece of rolled paper blackly charred, and close beside the match by which it had been ignited.

It was a note that had been written in pencil, and on the surface he was able to decipher these few words:

"**** at once **** ut fail. Same place and we will ****"

"There's nothing whatever in her pockets, sir. They're cleaned out," spoke Mrs. Splubbs, coming from the closet.

"Look here, madam, this is Miss Deems, isn't it?"

He displayed the picture. After a studying gaze at it, she said:

"No, sir; I don't think it can be."

"You do not—why?"

"It's mightily like her, but there's a difference."

"In what respect?"

"The eyes."

"Well—the eyes?"

"Nell Deems's eyes are very black—these are a kind of brown, not like her eyes at all."

"You can swear to the color of Miss Deems's eyes?"

"That I can, sir—black as midnight."

There was nothing to be gathered from Mrs. Splubbs.

He left the house. Whatever his thoughts or surmises, they were locked in silence within him.

The few traceable lines upon the charred paper suggested that Nell Deems had an appointment with some one. To him—who could almost tell the character of a person by the appearance of their private surroundings—this note betrayed that Nell Deems had been in her room quite recently. The general tidiness of the apartment indicated that she would not have permitted burnt paper to remain on the nicely painted hearth when a draught might scatter it in disfigurement there.

Was the landlady right in suspecting that her boarder had gone off with a lover or husband? or was there some foul play behind the request to come to a certain place of meeting?

But a stronger suspicion than either of these was being gradually entertained by the shrewd detective.

Midnight of that night found him sitting in the rear office of the Agency buried in profound reflection.

"The Hound," was mapping out a course of procedure, based upon the suspicion hinted above. It was an invariable habit of his.

He had made a singular and suspicious discovery during that afternoon, the nature of which will be shown in our next chapter.

Suddenly the stillness of the room was broken by the telephone bell.

Loudly and at quick intervals it rung, startling Hound from his absorbing meditation.

"What's up?" he answered, at the box.

"City Detective Agency?" came the inquiry from afar.

"Correct."

"An officer wanted at once. No.—Prytania street."

"All right."

Another summons from the residence of Girard Ardway.

What could it mean at this unseemly hour?

He looked at his watch. It lacked five minutes to one o'clock.

With a remark to the night clerk that roused him from his sleepy nodding over a newspaper, Hound started for Prytania street.

A terrible discovery was in store for him.

He was about to be confronted by a new and startling phase in the trail he had scarcely yet started upon.

CHAPTER IV.

A MEETING AT THE SQUARE.

THERE had been another visitor at the Ardway mansion within an hour after The Hound's interview there.

"Mr. Silas Margrip to see you, sir," announced a servant.

"Margrip? Show him up here, to the library."

Ardway was expecting the lawyer, for he arose as that party entered, saying:

"You are punctual, Mr. Margrip."

"Yes, sir, always punctual—always your obedient—*ad libitum*."

"I have a new piece of business to arrange with you."

"Glad to hear it, sir—delighted."

"Please be seated."

Silas Margrip was a man of under stature, with very broad shoulders and a wasp-like waist, wearing long, narrow, pointed gaiters. His hair was quite long and bushy, pushed carelessly back from the temples; his nose prominently long and sharpening downward; eyes of a glistening black, beady, unwinking, ratty.

The lawyer was a miser, a successful practitioner, but, though reputed wealthy himself, ever betrayed a profoundly servile respect for

others who were well supplied with riches, more especially if dollars were to be plucked from the piles thereof.

His voice was a rasp, a wheeze, short and gassy.

"I wish to speak about my will," Ardway continued.

"Your will?"

"There appears to have arisen a necessity for altering it."

"Certainly. Yes, sir. Of course—a la mode. Ahem!"

Margrip was slightly surprised.

"The will you prepared at my request, in view of the adoption of Edna Crystol as my ward, is entirely satisfactory as far as intended. But I have recent reasons for desiring that there should be another, a later dated will, in which this young lady shall be entirely ignored."

Old Silas was inwardly hugely astonished.

He had been at no small trouble to find the daughter of Colonel Crystol; but she was found, satisfactorily identified, papers of adoption were already prepared.

Ardway's will had been drawn, signed and witnessed, making his ward joint heir with his two children, Royal and Clarice.

Clarice was then completing her course of studies at a Maryland seminary.

As if to prevent the very inquiry of wonderment Margrip might have ventured, Ardway added:

"My reasons for this change are a secret of my own."

"Oh, decidedly—of course."

"Simply rewrite the will as it is, with the exception that you leave out any mention of Edna Crystol. If I should die before a certain matter is definitely settled, this last is the will that must go to probate. Bring it to me tomorrow for signature."

"Yes, I will—*ante meridiem*."

"The morning will be most convenient."

"I'll have it here."

"Another thing—"

"Name it, sir."

"The fact of alteration in my will—or, indeed, that I have as much as made any will—must remain strictly secret."

"Oh, depend upon me for that. *Ars est celare artem*."

"That is all I have to say, Mr. Margrip. Perhaps you had best take the existing will with you to copy from."

"Yes, I think so."

Ardway stepped to a small safe in one corner of the library and drew forth a legal-looking document, handing it to Margrip.

It was the will which gave to Edna Crystol an equal inheritance with Royal and Clarice Ardway.

The lawyer departed with a puzzled twinkling in his beady eyes.

"It's none of my business—ahem! no," he mumbled, as he sped away with a seesaw gait.

"Alter his will a thousand times, if he chooses; all the same and better for me. A thousand alters, a thousand fees. Some people are quirky. Quirky people who can pay are my game all the time. *Certum pete finem*."

Ardway did not long remain in the library. Locking his safe and desk, he stepped out into the hallway.

He had a business engagement at that hour.

To his surprise he encountered Edna coming forward.

"Why, Edna, I thought you were going for a drive with Royal?"

"But I changed my mind, guardy."

"And why, dear?"

She drew near to him caressingly.

"Because, on second thought I preferred to come and be with you, you dear, good guardy. I hardly know you yet, except that you have a big, kind heart, and I want to love you so much! Have your visitors gone?—and can I have you all to myself?"

She was smiling brightly; but her eyes were restless, her soft cheeks flushing.

"My visitors are gone, Edna, but—"

"Then let us go back into the library, guardy, and have a long, long talk."

"I have an engagement," he said, leaning to kiss her lovely forehead. "I much desire just the long, long talk you invite, my dear; you have not yet related to me the history of your past life."

"And you must keep this engagement?"

"Unavoidably—yes."

"I am sorry. Can I have you this evening?" playfully.

"Yes. I regret that you lost the pleasure of your drive for this disappointment."

With another tender kiss he left her.

Edna stood looking after him until he had disappeared down the staircase; then a strange change came over the beautiful face.

In it was depicted a thrilling surprise, fear, a mingling frown of sinister depth. Something had transpired to transform the lovely Edna Crystol, as by the donning of a mask, into a woman whose heart beat in combined alarm and viciousness.

With steps of nervous haste she sought her private apartments and sat down to indite a brief note—brief, because it was composed of

but two lines. This she addressed to Lock Box City P. O. No name.

In her own carriage—among the first presents received from her new and liberal guardian—she was soon being driven to the post-office. For some reason she did not choose to trust a messenger.

Stamping and mailing the note, she returned to her palatial home.

At about four o'clock P. M. again Miss Crystol went forth in her private equipage. This time her course was toward the old cathedral.

In front of Jackson Square she alighted.

The carriage drove off under instructions to return in twenty minutes.

Edna advanced toward the monument.

She did not observe, following closely behind her, a young man with oil-d blonde hair, effeminate mustache and ethereally cut garments, who carried a book of poems in one hand, and whose eyes were bent upward in a silent mood of dreamy inspiration.

Sanctuary idly near the monument was a man—The Prince, Desmond.

"You received my note?" she accosted him briefly.

"That is what brings me here."

The young man with the book had paused, and was absently contemplating the monument, seemingly oblivious to all else.

Edna cast a suspicious glance toward him, saying:

"Let us move away from here."

"What for?"

She nodded toward the party with the book.

"Oh! that fellow? He isn't paying any attention to us. If he had knee-breeches on he would make a good Oscar Wilde. But come this way. Now what is it you have to communicate that you are afraid to say it within the walls of the Ardway mansion?"

"There are many reasons why we might not have an opportunity to speak privately together there. What I have to tell you will not admit of delay."

"Something extraordinary?" he rejoined, lightly.

"It is."

"Out with it then."

"The plot is in danger of failure!"

There was that in the words to cause him to start.

"What do you mean?"

"There has been a great oversight."

"How?"

"The eyes of the picture are painted brown."

"The picture—"

"Of Edna Crystol."

"Ah, yes. Well?"

"Look at my eyes—as you should have done in the first place."

She raised her veil and regarded him steadily with her black-agate orbs.

Then as she lowered the veil, he clinched his fists, with the muttering hiss:

"I'm a fool!"

"It would seem so," she said, half-sneeringly.

"We must get the picture and have the eyes altered."

"It is now too late for that."

"Too late?" uneasily.

"The picture is in the hands of another party."

"Who has it?"

"A man named Hound."

He looked at her for an instant, speechlessly.

"Hound—Harry Hound?" fell in a gasp from his lips.

"He is a detective. I judge you know him by the way you act. Let me tell you: I was going out for a drive this afternoon with Royal Ardway, when I saw a strange man shown into Mr. Ardway's library. Determined to know his business there, I entered the adjoining room and, by means of the secret of the picture, of which you luckily informed me, I was enabled to hear all that passed."

"What did you hear?" he questioned feverishly.

"The man's name was Hound. Girard Ardway has noticed the circumstance of different colored eyes. He strongly suspects something wrong. He has employed the detective to satisfy him whether or not I am Edna Crystol. But there is more."

"More!" he echoed excitedly. "Is not this enough? That Hound is the keenest detective in New Orleans to-day. If he is on our trail—"

"Listen, for my time is limited. It is growing late."

"Go on."

"A lawyer named Margrip also visited the house to-day. He has been requested to prepare another will, in which Edna Crystol is totally ignored."

"Fury!" gnashed The Prince, in an under-breath. "When is this to be signed?"

"To-morrow forenoon."

A peculiar gleam lighted his eyes. He seemed to grow calmer, with a sudden thought.

"I must be going, now," Edna said. "The carriage will return in a few minutes. I have done all I can in bringing you this information—"

"Do not be frightened," he returned, with a confident air.

"Separate from me here. It would hardly do to have it known that Charles Courtley and Edna Crystol have such meetings—"

"Wait."

"What is it?"

"The other, the existing will—where is it now?"

"Margrip has it."

"Ah! has he? Well, *au revoir*."

She turned and left him abruptly.

CHAPTER V.

THE OWL ASSASSIN.

THE carriage was punctually approaching as Edna Crystol returned to the park entrance.

For a few seconds Desmond stood looking after her. Then he started rapidly from the spot. An evil smile, that could scarcely be called a smile, twitched the muttering lips beneath his mustache.

"Suspected! The Hound on the track! By Heaven! there must be prompt action here. Curse the picture—its brown eyes, I mean. But I'll beat them after all! I shall summon The Owls. There is work, urgent work, ahead for The Owls!"

The young man with the book turned away from the monument. His eyes were no longer filled with the languor of a fantasy-soaring mind; instead, they snapped shrewdly as he covertly watched the receding form of Edna Crystol.

"Strikes me there is a remarkable intimacy between Miss Crystol and the fellow who calls himself Charles Courtley. I would give ten dollars to have heard what they were saying."

The voice was that of Harry Hound.

As a first move he was shadowing Edna Crystol. He had net with some reward.

The Hound had a cab near by. Entering the conveyance, he was leisurely driven in the wake of Miss Crystol's handsome equipage.

As he passed the Ardway mansion she was alighting to go in. Reasoning that she was likely to remain at home during the balance of the late afternoon, he dismissed the cab at the end of a few turns.

Slipping a five-dollar bill to the driver, he cautioned:

"This is business, Jerry. Be mum! Hold yourself ready for me at any minute."

"All right—and mum's the go, sir. Reckon I've served you long enough to know what's wanted of me."

Early in that evening Royal Ardway was about leaving the house when he met Edna in the entryway.

Royal was a fine-looking young fellow. His face was frank and engaging; he wore slight side-whiskers and mustache, with the chin cleanly shaved.

In height and form he was much like Harry Hound. This fact of resemblance is mentioned for the reader's remembrance.

"Going out, Royal?" asked the beautiful girl, inquisitively.

"Yes, Edna."

"I would like to know where to?"

"You must not be so curious."

"But I want you with me."

"Anything in particular?"

She threw her arms around his neck impulsively. Her lovely face was aglow. "Stay at home, won't you?"

For a transient spell he was simply astonished at this sudden display of passionate affection—for it seemed no less; then forcing a smile he said:

"My evenings are always engaged, Edna."

"With whom?"

"A young lady who is very dear to me."

"Oh, Royal!"

He interrupted by a reverent kiss, and disengaging the clinging arms passed out.

"Good Heavens!" burst aloud from him, when outside. "We have known one another only two days, and I believe she has fallen desperately in love with me. What would Bella say? I must put a stop to it by hastening my marriage."

Shortly thereafter we find him at a cottage in a widely removed locality—an humble dwelling with a modest little garden-way at the front.

"Bella" resided here, and it was she who opened the door to admit him, for immediately he was encircled in a loving embrace while a pair of fresh young lips were upturned for a kiss.

Isabel Clyde was the young man's betrothed—a pretty little lady of about twenty years of age, with very soulful blue eyes, and a disposition of that quiet kind which holds the deepest ardor. She and her widowed mother alone occupied the cottage, Bella managing to earn a comfortable living by teaching instrumental music.

Royal had himself taken lessons from Miss Clyde; it was over the keys of the piano he had resolved that she should be his wife if he could win her.

It had not been an easy task for him to convince her that the son and heir of so wealthy a man as Girard Ardway could sincerely love the

poor and struggling music-teacher. But when moved by his honest and persistent earnestness, she had finally yielded up to him the best love of her heart.

There was a bar to their immediate union. Good-natured though Girard Ardway was, Royal still had some fears that his father would oppose the marriage. The former had high ambitions for his son's future.

"But I will delay no longer, Bella," he said, as on this night, they sat side by side. "To-morrow I will inform my father of our attachment and my desire for an early consummation of the ceremony."

"You know best, Royal, dearest. But—"

"But what?"

"What if he—"

"Forbids it, you would say?"

"Yes," unsteadily.

"Let us not invite trouble. I am quite old enough to select my own wife."

"But think; you and your father would be enemies."

"Oh, come, Bella; you are imagining improbable difficulties."

"I feel oppressed," she said, husbly.

"Oppressed?—wherefore?"

"I do not know. Oh, Royal! there is a weight on my heart to-night. I feel as if an evil cloud had come over our love—yours and mine."

She clung tightly to him as she spoke, as if even then some unseen presence was hovering near to blight their happiness.

And so there was.

Beyond the window of the humble sitting-room—which looked out upon the brick walk leading around to the rear door—gleamed a pair of eyes—gleamed in silent watching fury upon the oblivious lovers, gathering intenser fire at every affectionate demonstration made by the couple.

"Hush, Bella! This is not an age for foolish fantasies and superstitious fears. Be cheerful, darling. To-morrow I will have a talk with my father."

Ah! "to-morrow."

How many castles have fallen before the arrival of that promised day!

It was after ten o'clock when he left the cottage of the Clydes. He did not perceive a cloaked and hooded female form that came around from the side of the building and followed him at a distance.

"I love him—madly love him—and he is the promised of another," muttered the mysterious spy, lowly. "I am too late. He is lost to me. But"—with vehemence—"if lost to me, he shall never be the husband of another. I have loved you from afar, Royal Ardway; I vowed I would yet be your wife. That dream is past, I plainly see. Now look to yourself. If I cannot have you I will destroy you. You shall never wed that girl!"

As she moved away, the form of a man—who had been prone on his face on the inside of a low iron railing—vaulted noiselessly over onto the pavement.

"Cuss that shemal!" he blurted, in a coarse whisper. "If it hadn't been for her comin'—an' I thought it was a man—I might 'a' downed the gent an' made my pile. An' she ain't no friend of hisn, anyhow—torkin' about destroyin' him. Cracker Bill, mebbe here's a chance for a side lay. As how? Why, run down the gal, interduce myself, an' for a roll o' greens rub out the recreant loyer. That's the racket."

With the tread of a cat he trailed the cloaked female.

He saw her enter a basement door beyond a gate in a rich-looking garden on Prytania street.

"But I ain't seen her phiz. That's bad. As how? 'Cause how am I to know my spot?" and thinking on this point, the prowler glided off in the darkness.

At a certain street-corner young Ardway met a man—

Percy Desmond. The meeting was evidently an appointment.

"Ten minutes late, my boy," was Desmond's hail.

"Oh, that isn't much. But I am sorry I kept you waiting. Come, I am feeling bright for a game to-night."

They sought a gambling-saloon on Custom-house street.

It was after midnight when they separated. As Royal opened the door of his home—and ere he had withdrawn the latch-key from its lock—he paused, struck with a thrill of dread.

For at that instant he heard a distant, half-smothered cry, as if uttered by some one in mortal agony.

Agreeable to understanding, Ardway, senior, after tea sent a message to Miss Crystol that he would be pleased to see her in the library.

He was somewhat surprised to hear, in return:

"Miss Crystol has retired for the night with a headache, and is now sleeping, with the request that she shall not be disturbed."

This from the new French maid, Josette, delivered at the furthest outer door to Miss Crystol's apartments.

Josette had been specially engaged to wait upon Miss Crystol.

"So I have at once a mystery!" exclaimed the jaunty maid to herself, while one hand closed upon a gold dollar in the pocket beneath her apron. "In the hall, when I come from the errand, I have met the mademoiselle. From my head, from my back, she take quick the hood, the cloak, and in my hand the money falls, and she say: 'I am so sick—I have to retire—I go to my room—I sleep—I must see nobody—you understand, Josette?' Ha, ha, ha! But I have pleasure in mysteries! How well she know, by my eyes, I am the devoted servant of mademoiselle. I shall guard away the intruder from the bedroom of my mistress, for she been so sick she retire; she wish to see nobody."

And with an amused chuckle the sly Josette turned the key on the inside of the door, and went about preparing the change of robe for her mysterious mistress when the latter should show herself.

For Edna Crystol was not in her room at all; nor was she there until a very late hour. Of all the servants in the household Josette was the only one awake, and the maid was descending the stairs with some apprehension that her mistress had been locked out, when Edna appeared like an apparition, coming from the basement.

Noiselessly they reached the sleeping-apartment.

Edna was breathing fast with excitement.

"Josette."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Not a word of this, if you value your situation and my favors."

"If mademoiselle have not mention made herself, already I had forgotten."

The stillness of midnight reigned over the city. Soundly sleeping in his luxurious bed-chamber lay Girard Ardway. He dreamed, and his visions were those of a man whose mind is at ease and friendship with the world.

As the minutes passed, however, he became restless in his sleep. There was something in the air surrounding which transmitted an ominous sensation to his brain.

Presently, with a start in every limb, he awoke—

Awoke to be confronted by a terror!

The light burned dimly. By its uncertain halo he saw a sight that might well drive the blood in a chill centering to his heart.

At his bedside was a dominoed figure. One of its arms was raised aloft, and in a black-gloved hand was poised a gleaming knife.

But there was more than the mere presence, with its threatening attitude, to rivet the gaze of Girard Ardway and for a second stupefy him with amazement.

It was the face he saw towering over him—staring, glaring, turned immovably upon him—the face of a huge, wide-eyed, drooping-beaked owl!

A cry that was a shriek broke from his lips. He essayed to leap from the bed, but, ere he could relieve himself of the covers the non-descript grappled him, and the knife flashed.

There was a dull thud, followed by a groan of agony.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ASTOUNDING CIRCUMSTANCE.

ROYAL ARDWAY bounded up the grand staircase three steps at a time.

There could be no mistaking the terrible import of the cry he had heard.

As if by magic the house, recently so grimly dark, flashed numerous lights from its long windows; hurrying feet tramped in the upper passages.

The fearful sound had been heard by the soundest sleepers. The servants came rushing from their quarter of the building, some bearing lamps, the faces of all long-drawn with alarm.

In the side hall leading to Girard Ardway's bed-chamber Royal and Edna met.

"Oh, Royal! what was it?"

"Heaven only knows—I do not."

"To me it seemed like the voice of a human in distress."

"Strangely like that."

Behind the young master were congregating the several servants of the household, speechless, wondering, frightened, staring as if expecting him to ascertain and explain the source of the curdling noise which had broken their slumbers.

As his gaze turned upon them he grew as pale as they.

He well knew each face of all employed about the house; there was not one absent, even to the garden boy.

He slowly looked at Edna.

"That noise should have aroused any one."

"I think so, Royal."

"There appears to be only one missing."

"Ah! your father—guardy?"

As Edna spoke, there seemed to draw a momentary line of blue about the cherry-red lips, as if a chill had struck into her every fiber.

"Can anything have happened to him?"

"We shall soon know!" he exclaimed, in a trembling voice.

With the others closely following he hastened to his father's bed-chamber.

Neither knock nor call met with any response.

Royal was now thoroughly alarmed.

"There is but one thing to be done."

"What, Royal?"

For reply he drew back and braced himself for a shock. Then throwing all his weight into the leap he dashed heavily against the door.

This he had to repeat several times ere the strong fastenings yielded.

Presently the door went inward and backward with a quivering bang.

On the threshold all paused with a gasp of horror.

There could no longer be any doubt as to who had uttered the awful cry.

The room of Girard Ardway was a sight to behold. Everything was in disorder; on every side was evidence of a recent and deadly struggle. Upon the snowy-white bed-clothing, which lay scattered and twisted, were plainly visible great smeary stains of blood.

Royal staggered back, clapping one hand to his brow as if smitten a blow.

Recovering himself in an instant, and without a word, he passed the gaping group at the doorway, descending to the library.

In the darkness, and with the steps of a drunken man, he groped his way to the telephone. His touch sent a sharp summons to the main office.

"Well—hello!" was the sleepy response.

"A detective wanted at once. No.—Prytania street. Be quick!"

"All right."

As he left the instrument, Edna joined him, bearing a light. Setting the lamp upon the table, she approached him, her black-agate eyes wide and startled.

"Royal—Royal! this is horrible."

He groaned.

"Have you notified the police?"

"Yes."

"I am feeling very weak," she said, swaying with a seeming dizziness.

"Better go to your room, Edna."

"I fear I must."

"Let Josette attend you. This is too terrible a shock for you."

"I will do as you say. I have closed the apartment, and forbidden any one entering it until an officer shall arrive."

"That was thoughtful and proper, Edna."

But Edna Crystol did not appear to be as weak as she professed. Going to her room, she donned a hood and long cloak, and hid her face beneath a thick brown veil, then emerged stealthily into the corridor.

Unseen she descended to the basement, and passed out into the dark night.

Yet not wholly unseen.

The French maid, Josette, chanced to be coming, with a glass of wine for Mr. Royal Ardway, and was in the almost impenetrable shadow of the entry extension beyond the stairs leading to the basement.

Still as a statue stood the girl, to watch the fitting figure she recognized to be her mistress. When Edna had vanished, she clinched her disengaged hand in a convulsive perturbation.

"*Mon Dieu!* what it means? Shall my mistress so beautiful be the vile woman who make this crime? The master is lying murdered upstairs. Mademoiselle Crystol has one grand mystery about her before I have been two days with her! So beautiful—and the heiress of the rich master! Ah! I cannot understand this. I am all mix up."

It was in answer to this midnight summons that Harry Hound now strode rapidly into Prytania street and toward the palatial No. —.

He observed with some surprise the brilliantly illuminated windows.

Being at once admitted, he was shown to the library, where Royal awaited him.

The young man sat with head bowed to his hands. As he looked up and arose to meet the comer, The Hound saw a face pinched by inexpressible woe.

"You are a detective, sir?"

"That is my profession."

"Your services are sadly needed here."

"What has happened?"

Royal could not find voice for several seconds.

"Oh, it is horrible!" he groaned, at last, with a lumping sob.

"Come, let me know what is the matter."

"An awful crime has been committed."

"Of what kind?"

"Murder."

"Who has been murdered?"

"My father."

"You cannot mean it!"

"Would I jest upon such a thing?"

"What seems to have been the object—burglary?"

"I do not know. I have not looked or even thought—"

"The first thing is to show me where the deed was committed," interrupted The Hound, now keenly alert.

Royal conducted him to the bloody bedroom. Around the closed door the servants were

grouped, suppressedly whispering and waiting agog for the officer's arrival.

The detective stepped upon the scene of the red mystery.

Royal was faint and clinging to the back of a chair for support.

"For Heaven's sake, sir, do something promptly," urged the shocked son.

"Whatever is to be done will be done just that way, depend."

Carefully about the floor, under the couch, in every corner searched The Hound, in the hope that something might have been dropped by the assassin to give a clew.

Rising beside the rumpled bed, he started perceptibly and stood gazing down at it fixedly.

"There seems to be a mystery here besides the crime," he said.

"What have you discovered?"

"First let me ask: had you looked about this room before I came here?"

"No."

"Had any one else?"

"I believe not. Miss Crystol closed the door, she informed me, forbidding any one to enter."

"And no one passed out between the time of the closing of the door and the present minute?" this more particularly addressed to the servants.

There was a negative and emphatic shaking of heads.

"Without entering here at all," Royal said.

"I hastened to the telephone to call for the aid of the police."

"Where is Miss Crystol?"

"I am here," replied Edna for herself.

She made her way forward. Her face was not white, now; it was suffused with the heightened color of some recent exertion.

Josette stood behind her. The maid was watching her mistress in a peculiar way, with a strained expression on her brunette face.

The keen-eyed detective noticed this slight fact.

"Did you come in here, Miss Crystol?"

"No."

"Has any one seen Mr. Girard Ardway since he retired for the night?"

"No," answered all.

"Then where can he be?"

At this question from the detective there was a general amazement.

"Here is a double mystery," he added, pointing to the bed.

They stepped quickly forward—then paused with dilated eyes.

"Where is the body of the murdered man—if he has been murdered?"

A thunderbolt could not have astonished them more.

They gazed dumbstruck at the empty bed.

Girard Ardway had utterly vanished!

Dead or alive—he was gone!

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOUND'S MYSTERIOUS CASE.

THE position of the bed was in a niche to the left of the door. Hence, as no one had entered the apartment a sufficient length to gain a fair view of the bed, it was not strange that the fact of Ardway's singular absence had been unnoticed until the detective called attention to it.

"He is gone!" burst from Royal's lips.

"Gone!" echoed Edna—and this repeated by the servants crowding near.

The Hound, unobserved, was studying Miss Crystol's face.

Instantly upon beholding the evidence that there had been a murder, or an attempted murder, his suspicions were leveled upon her, though he could give no reasonable explanation to himself for such a feeling.

He argued, however, that if, by any possible chance, she had discovered the uncertainty regarding herself which existed in Girard Ardway's mind—and if there was a likelihood of proving that she was not the young lady she represented herself to be—then there was a powerful motive for the murderous removal of the wealthy man who had constituted himself her guardian, and named her as a joint heir to his immense estate.

It was apparent to him that Edna was as much amazed and puzzled by the mysterious affair as any one.

At this juncture a policeman appeared among them, accompanied by his lieutenant. For reasons, this incident annoyed the detective.

Harry calmly folded his arms and waited until they had finished with a multiplicity of questions, and taken their departure with the high importance of men who confidently expected to capture the criminal before day-dawn.

A smile that was an involuntary sneer wreathed his lips when they had left, for neither had asked, among all their excited alphabet of catechism, to look at the body of the murdered man.

This was a remarkable omission, to say the least. But the lieutenant had really seemed to be more excited than those directly concerned in the occurrence.

"Mr. Ardway, I wish to talk with you in private."

"Certainly, sir."

"Let us retire from here."

"Come to the library."
 "Have this door closed, please, and fastened."
 Giving the order as requested, Royal led the way to the library.
 When they were seated the detective said:
 "Please tell me whether your father wore anything in the shape of jewelry."
 "Yes."
 "Describe it."
 "He had a partiality for three bosom-studs—a solitaire diamond each; though he did not care to display them, wearing his vest buttoned high."
 "Anything more than ordinary about the studs?"
 "No."
 "Any marks?"
 "No; excepting that the button parts had engraved upon them the letter 'A'."
 "Any other jewelry?"
 "Nothing more than his watch—a handsome gold chronometer, which also had the initial inside the case, and a carnelian seal-ring."
 "Then there is burglary in the case."
 "Why do you say so?"
 "For the simplest of reasons. His bureau-drawers were rifled over; his shirt-bosom I noticed, and there were no studs in it; there was no watch in the vest which I saw on the back of a chair—it had been jerked roughly from its receptacle, for the clasp of the chain, which was of peculiar pattern, still remained. The robbery was completed before the struggle—your prompt hastening to and entering the room upon hearing the cry proves that. Plainly, burglary was the prime object; your father awakened; the assassin struck. But now there are two items which puzzle me immensely."
 "What are they?"
 "First place, why should the burglar carry off the body of your father?"
 "You think he has been kidnapped?"
 "Well, it looks decidedly that way, does it not?"
 "True. But what else—"
 "Second place—how could he possibly have carried off the body, when you state emphatically that the door was locked upon the inside, and, too, scarcely a minute elapsed between the time of your hearing the cry and bursting in the door?"
 There ensued a brief silence. Royal was at a loss for any suggestion.
 "Now, Mr. Ardway, I think I have pretty thoroughly examined that room. It has but one large window; it opens upon the garden; it was latched upon the inside; it could not have been unlatched for access, then locked after egress and leave the panes whole. There is no manner of reaching the window, either by tree, spout, or lightning-rod. Your father was a heavy man, yet he has been deliberately made off with, by some one strong enough to carry him, or compel him to go. There is but one theory."
 "What is your theory?"
 "There must be some secret passages leading through this house."
 "Oh, that might do for olden times," said Royal, doubtfully.
 "How long have you lived here?"
 "Ten years."
 "Well, how else would you account for the disappearance of your father?"
 "Ah! I must leave all to you, Mr. Hound. My brain is too confused to think at all. Bring to justice the murderer of my father and I will make you a rich man."
 "You wish me to undertake the case?"
 "Assuredly. By all means, and—do your best."
 "Depend upon it. And let me tell you something."
 "What?"
 "I will bring back Girard Ardway all right." Royal stared blankly at this bold avowal.
 "You say bring him back all right?"
 "Those were my words."
 "You mean you will recover the body from those who have slain him?"
 "No, I will recover it from those who have not slain but made off with him."
 "Good Heavens! you think he is—"
 "Alive!"
 "But the blood?"
 "Wounds, perhaps. But it is a blind. I have good, but very private reasons for believing that your father is in the meshes of a plot. There, do not excite yourself; remain calm throughout and leave the work to me. Let us go down into the garden."
 "Why to the garden?"
 "My dear sir, you must make up your mind to oblige every little request I shall make. I have a curiosity to look around there a bit."
 The two proceeded to the garden.
 It was a dark night; the shrubbery and few trees were like dim specters on a dimmer background.
 But the detective was prepared. From his pocket he drew a bull's-eye lantern, which was lighted in a trice by a mechanical contrivance. Then he glided about, his eyes bent searchingly on the ground.
 "What do you expect to find here?" Royal inquired.

At that instant, as if in answer, The Hound stooped and picked up something.
 "This, among other things—or for one, anyhow."
 "What have you there?"
 By the rays of the lamp, Royal saw an article that had evidently been made to be used as a disguise for the face.
 An admirable imitation of a great owl's wide, round-eyed phiz.
 "It is a mask!"
 "Yes."
 "Rather a strange one."
 "It amounts to a revelation that whoever had use for such a thing has passed through this garden."
 "The burglar?"
 "That is my opinion. It is a common method with that class of rascals to hide their faces in some such gear. The fellow has some wit to use the face of an owl, being a bird of the night himself. We will return to the house."
 In the lower entry, Royal took a diary from his pocket.
 "I shall get you to perform a friendly service for me, Mr. Hound."
 "With pleasure."
 The young man handed him a slip of paper containing a few lines.
 "It is a message to my sister, Clarice, who is finishing a course of study in the city of Baltimore. She must come home at once. Will you kindly attend to it for me at the telegraph office?"
 "I will send it to-night."
 "Thank you."
 "Of course, Mr. Ardway, this thing cannot be kept out of the newspapers—I wish it could. To any occurring inquiries, please be reticent; say that it is in the hands of detectives."
 "I will do so."
 "For the present, good-night. I may see you soon again—perhaps not. Be at reasonable ease, and remember that I am working."
 The detective stepped out of the house. The door closed.
 Simultaneously a hand fell upon his arm.
 "Monsieur!"
 It was Josette.
 The light from a near-by lamp shone dimly on her face, but plainly enough to reveal to him that she was deeply agitated.

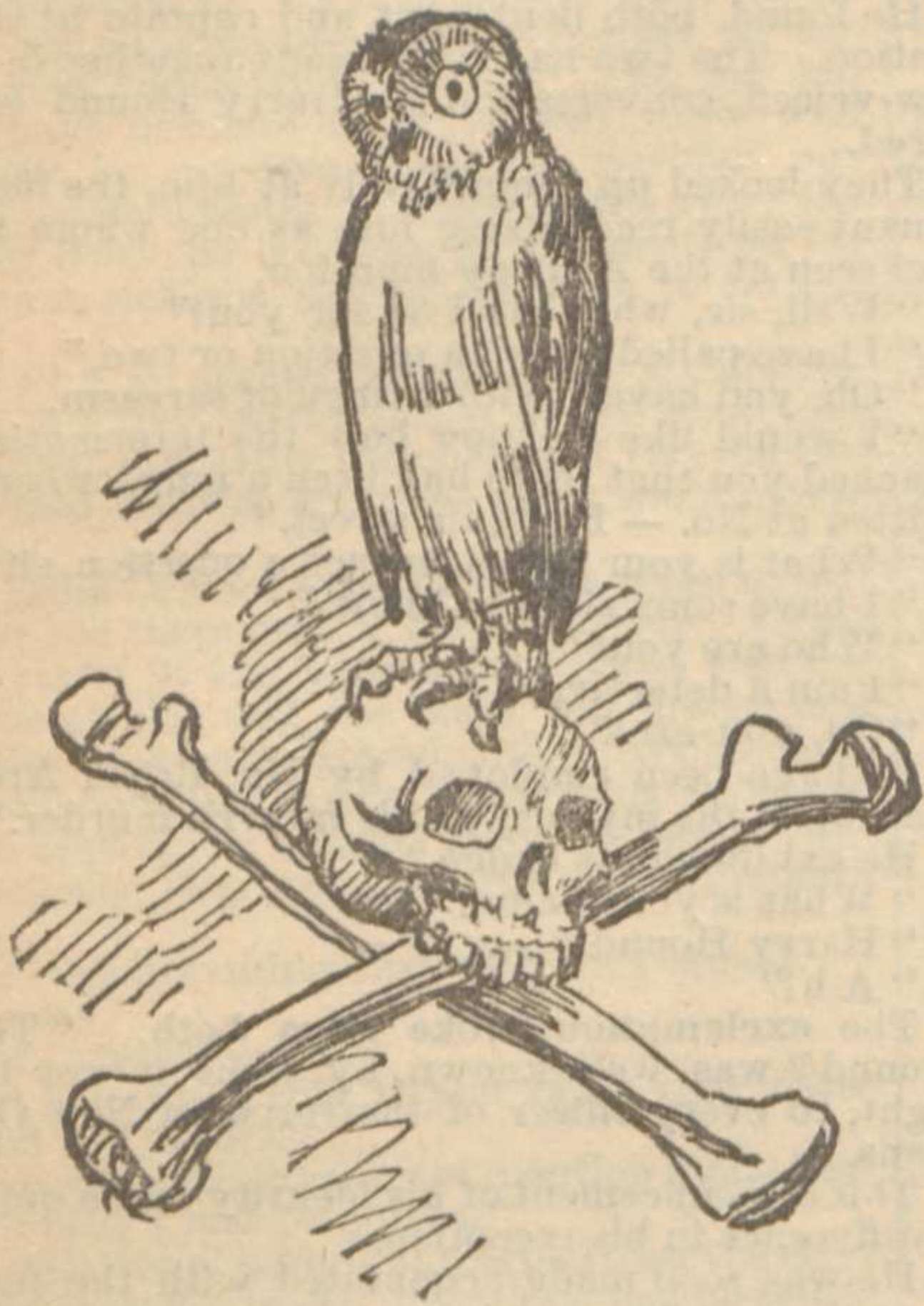
CHAPTER VIII.

BEWARE THE OWLS.

THE girl continued suppressedly:
 "I would speak with you, Monsieur Detective."
 "Well, what have you to say?"
 "You have seen me there?" pointing to indicate the interior of the house.
 "Yes, I saw you up-stairs, I believe."
 "I am Josette. I serve the Mademoiselle Crystol."
 "What are you driving at?"
 "You wish to know something?"
 "About what?"
 "Ah, ciel! of the murder I speak."
 "Speak on then."
 "There is a secret."
 "What kind of a secret?"
 "One grand mystery of the mademoiselle."
 "Miss Crystol?"
 "Of her I mean."
 "If it concerns the murder, let me hear it."
 "She been privately out while we have stand and wait for the officer."
 "Out?"
 "Oui, monsieur. With the hood and cloak of disguise she run out when she think nobody look, and come back with the grand excitement in her face so beautiful. I have see this. Again when the night was early she have take the cloak, the hood, and slip out quick. She said to me: 'Josette, I am sick, I shall retire, I shall see nobody from my room. You understand?' When Monsieur Ardway send for her once I must tell the big lie: 'My mistress she is much indispose. You excuse her.' It is a mystery of the Mademoiselle Crystol—do you not think?"
 "Why do you tell me this?"
 "You are the detective!"
 "Yes."
 "To you must be told the everything."
 "True."
 "Then why I shall not tell to you whatever I can? Of the great import it may be—or may be not so; I cannot judge that."
 Throughout The Hound had regarded her steadily.
 He was an apt reader of faces. The twinkling little eyes of the girl, her eager yet servile demeanor, and peculiarly wistful gestures, revealed her character distinctly to him.
 Exactly what he read there was shown by his action the next minute.
 Running one hand into his pocket he drew out a bright dollar. The coin he placed in the ready though assumedly reluctant palm of the maid, remarking, quietly:
 "Take this as a reward for your information, my girl."
 "Ah, merci, monsieur!"
 "Should you have anything further to communicate, you will have later opportunity."

"I shall have delight to serve monsieur."
 With this Harry Hound left her standing on the steps.
 "The girl may be of use to me," he thought; "though I must remember the wise saw: 'A dog that will fetch will carry.' She's an avaricious piece, I see; money will buy her backward or forward. But the information has given me an idea. I must see that lieutenant who comes to the house."
 He found both lieutenant and captain at the station. The two had their heads together in a low-voiced conversation as Harry Hound entered.
 They looked up inquisitively at him, the lieutenant easily recognizing him as one whom he had seen at the Ardway mansion.
 "Well, sir, what can I do for you?"
 "I have called to ask a question or two."
 "Oh, you have?" with a tinge of sarcasm.
 "I would like to know how the information reached you that there had been a murder committed at No. — Prytania street."
 "What is your object in such a question, sir?"
 "I have some right to know."
 "Who are you?"
 "I am a detective."
 "Oh, you are?"
 "I have been employed by Mr. Royal Ardway upon the mystery of his father's murder."
 He exhibited his badge.
 "What is your name?"
 "Harry Hound!"
 "Ah!"
 The exclamation broke from both. "The Hound" was well known, by fame if not by sight, to every officer of the force in New Orleans.
 This announcement of his identity made quite a difference in his reception.
 He was soon made acquainted with the fact that the patrolman on beat had been approached by a woman—a woman whose face was covered by a veil, wearing an ample hood and long cloak.
 She made the startling declaration that a murder had transpired at No. — Prytania street. It was involved in considerable mystery. This was accompanied by a strange hint. Royal Ardway was addicted to heavy gambling; he was the largest prospective heir in his father's estate; of late he had betrayed much depression of spirit, produced, it was presumed, by his losses at the gaming-table. It would probably be as well to investigate the young man.
 So much for the woman.
 "Who was this woman?" Harry queried.
 "We have no idea. She told Patrolman Rogers she was a servant in the house."
 "Did he see her face?"
 "No. She whisked off before Rogers could insist upon that. It would seem that her information was correct in part, anyhow."
 "May I ask what you purpose doing, gentlemen?"
 "Assuredly nothing to interfere with your operations, Mr. Hound," was the evasive answer.
 "But in a murder case, you are aware, we have certain steps necessary—"
 "Oh, yes, I know that."
 Thanking them for the information they had given him, he left the station.
 His eyes twinkled amusedly.
 "I think there will be a breeze around that station by daylight, when they find there isn't any corpse to prove a murder. Somebody will feel like kicking himself when he remembers that he did not even ask for a glimpse of the dead body at No. — Prytania street. Pretty botchers, truly."
 Then his thoughts turned upon the matter of how the patrolman had been first apprised of the tragedy.
 Supposing Josette's gossip to be strictly straight, Miss Crystol was the hooded female who had encountered the man Rogers.
 She must have a deep motive for fastening criminal suspicion upon Royal Ardway.
 A person with such strong motive might, naturally enough, be an intimate accomplice in the murder or abduction or both.
 This indicated either malice or a plot against Royal—of whose absolute innocence the detective felt assured.
 But Harry Hound did not jump headlong at any such conclusions.
 "It may be a plant," he argued half-aloud.
 "Perhaps it was Josette herself who started Rogers for the house; she may be even in collusion with the burglar—knows how he entered and made his exit, if she did not directly aid. Burglary was intended, and in part accomplished. It may be this very Josette is in league with some gang, and is trying to hide the trail of her associates by turning suspicion upon both Royal and Miss Crystol, they being the parties to derive most benefit from Girard Ardway's death. We shall learn anon, my birds."
 First dispatching the hurried telegram which was to bring Clarice Ardway home, he went to the agency for a respite of thought.
 A surprise awaited him.
 "Here's a note that was left for you not ten minutes ago, sir," said the watch clerk.
 "A note?"

"Yes, sir."
 "Who by?"
 The clerk chuckled, as he handed over the missive:
 "A negro brought it—about as black an imp as I ever saw."
 Tearing open the envelope, The Hound met with an astonisher.
 The following was the remarkable sheet that instantly riveted his gaze:—



"HANK HOUND:—Take your choice: abandon the Ardway trail, or die! This is no idle threat! Beware of the Owls of New Orleans!"

The Owls of New Orleans!
 There was no other special signature. The words were in type write print, thereby completely baffling any future tracing to its author by means of chirography.

The wide-eyed owl, perched upon its piratical pedestal, fairly seemed to be moaning forth the ominous warning.

A thrill passed over the detective—but it was not a thrill of dread. He shook himself almost as a great dog will when emerging from a swim, and his bold eyes flashed with the fire of enthusiasm.

"The trail begins to open!" he exclaimed.

"Sir?" said the clerk.

"Nothing—nothing."

Then in an undertone to himself:

"The Owls of New Orleans! Ha! there is a gang then. The mask at the Ardway mansion was one of these. This feels like getting into business. Instead of frightening me off, this scrap shall prove a bad move for the Owls."

At that instant the outer door opened and banged shut again.

In another moment Trim Taskar, the *Picayune* reporter, entered with the haste of one pursued.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WITCHES' DANCE.

THE solitary figure of a newspaper reporter was flitting through the dim and dangerous precinct of Franklin street.

At the moment of our sighting him he was at a certain point between Canal and St. Louis streets.

The hour lacked but a short while to midnight.

Trim Taskar was making toward the *Picayune* office to shape up his tablets.

Suddenly he paused, arrested by a noise, a singular mingling of discordant voices in a wailing, mourning, doleful symphony, which came from the house he was just then abreast of. This was accompanied, too, by a dully audible shuffling of feet, with timing stamps.

He would have continued on his way, supposing it to be nothing more than some hilarious parties holding a cake-walk, but to his ears came disconnected cries, expressions, words that indicated prayer or grieving of the peculiar kind common to the negro race.

The feet shuffled and glided regularly, the tunes maintained their weirdness with a striking earnestness.

The windows above were screened by curtains of dirty white muslin, and on the curtains occasionally moved a succession of phantom like shadows, as of several figures dancing past.

"What kind of people live in there?" Trim asked of a half drunken negress who came staggering along.

"Golly! you doanno?"

"No, I do not."

"You means dis yere house—yere?"

"Yes, this one."

"Sha' chile! dar wear de woodoo live at."

"Tae Voodoo?"

"Un-hngh!"

"What's going on in there; can you tell me?"

"How you 'spec' I knows. Dar wear de woodoo live at—"

"So you said."

"Dem's de n'ises, dem is."

"Noises?"

"Singin' wi' de spearts."

"Oh, the voodoo sings with spirits?"

"Un-hngh! Dem's de n'ises."

"Man or woman—this voodoo?"

"She's a woman outside'n de house, but in dar—Lo! she jes' sloughs de gyarmen's o' dis worl' an' jines de spearts."

"She does, eh?"

"Un-hngh! true, chile. Bes' be movin' Spearts prizin' roun' in dar."

She stepped back with a lurch as she uttered the maudlin warning, and reeled on her way.

Trim did not act upon the advice to clear out.

"So, a voodoo sorceress at her orgies, eh?" he muttered. "Come, I think there is a paragraph to be squeezed out of this. I've time enough to look into it, anyhow."

He had at once resolved to know what manner of seance was progressing within the somber house. But he knew well enough that the appearance of a stranger, especially a white man, would be an immediate signal for the cessation of whatever was transpiring.

To gather an item, in this instance, it must be stolen.

First making sure that he was unobserved, the reporter slipped, light-footed, into a narrow alley leading to the rear of the house.

At the end of the alley was a securely-bolted gate. Determined to have his "ite" he promptly scaled the fence, then stood still as a statue for some moments in the gloom of the yard to listen.

The weird sounds gave no sign of abating. He saw that the room on the second floor must extend from front to back of the building for the song-like wailings reached him fairly audible there, and the same flitting shadows were regularly crossing in the light on the muslin curtain.

Fortune favored the reporter.

Beneath the window was a narrow-roofed and steeply-slanted shed; at one corner of the shed was an immense hogshead for collecting rain-water.

Clambering up with these facilities, he was soon at the window.

Here again a fortunate circumstance furthered his object.

In one side the curtain had a small rent, as if torn by a nail in the window frame.

Through this rent he looked in upon a scene most remarkable.

The room was bare of everything in the shape of furniture excepting a camp-cot, which was placed in the middle of the floor.

Around the cot had been drawn, with a thick piece of chalk, a large ring.

Outside of this ring, going round and round, giving vent to the unearthly refrain, gyrating in nameless postures, were four female demons.

Demons, because they looked hardly human.

Four gigantic negresses; their visages striped like Indians' on a war path, with hideous daubs of paint; their hair—apparently some of it false—twisted long and straight upon wires, the end of some twists tipped with a rag of ribbon; their jacket sleeves reaching a d d dangling many inches longer than the hands; their great feet bare, and swishing in concert over the sanded planking; their clumsy ankles—visible as their skirts tossed to and fro—adorned by serpentine varvels.

Their cavernous mouths were wide with a fetich strain, something like this:

"Obi ask, Obi say,

De body am die an' de soul fly 'way!

Obi say mus' come fo' true,

Mix de mortal an' toad blood, too!

Obi get, Obi save

Token an' speart from outen de grave!

Obi charm de coffin-worm,

Make de snake an' debbil to squirm!

Hyar we draws de magic ring,

Hyar we 'fies de scarpin' sting!

Sisters fo'—de sister five,

Obi charm de speart alive!

Twine de cowl when de soul am riz,

Obi! Obi! hyar we is!"

Scrape-t-shuffle! scrape-t-shuffle! kept time the bare feet of the hideous four as they danced about, animated to a verge of frenzy, tossing their long-sleeved arms, contorting their masculine bodies into rupturing shapes.

And thrice over and over again they doled the dismal *melange* of their voodoo incantations.

An astonishing sight, even for a reporter.

But while they circled round and round, Trim Taskar, looking upon the cot by glimpses between their demonish forms, suddenly started at a strange discovery.

Lying upon the cot was a beautiful white girl!

She seemed to be the central object of the infernal orgie.

His heart gave a violent leap as he gazed, transfixed, upon the face that was as lovely as any he had ever beheld.

The girl's hands were crossed upon her bosom; her eyes were fixed steadily on the grimy ceil-

ing as if heedless of the Satanic rite being performed over her; and in her cheeks there was a transparent hue of death.

Then followed another discovery.

A door at one side, which opened away from the window, was slightly ajar.

Beyond the door Trim Taskar saw a comely white man. This party, was leaning in an attitude of close attention to the doings in the witches' room, and the grin of a lurking devil was upon his face.

Hardly had Trim taken in the whole astounding aspect when he was roughly interrupted at his watching.

A voice broke forth from a window above him.

"Hi, dar, you spyin' trash! What you doin' dar!"

Simultaneously a long handled whitewash brush was thrust forcibly downward, striking the reporter between neck and shoulder.

Losing his balance, he went tumbling from the shed, falling squarely and flop into the rain barrel—luckily, head up.

Extricating himself he climbed the fence again with the agility of a monkey and dashed down the alley into Franklin street, leaving a watery trail.

It was fresh from the vicinity of this incident that he appeared at the detective agency a few minutes after The Hound started to answer the midnight summons.

"Where's The Hound?" he asked.

"Gone out," responded the watch clerk, eying him comically.

"I must see him."

"Important?"

"A minute's delay may cost a human life."

"Possible!"

"Tell me where to find him—quick."

"In that case you had better go to No.—Prytania street. Guess you'll find him there."

Away went Trim, reaching the Ardway mansion in a high flutter.

"Mr. Hound is not here," was the answer to his inquiry; "there's nobody here but the family, sir."

"Not here!" echoed Trim, with dropping countenance.

"There was a gentleman to see Mr. Royal Ardway a little while ago—if he is the one you are looking for. But he's gone."

Trim started off on the hunt again. Back to the Agency, full speed.

And here he found the detective, rushing in upon him as shown at the close of the preceding chapter.

The reporter's clothing was drenched and smeared with whitewash scraped from the fence in his hurried flight; his hat was jammed and dented out of all shape.

The Hound looked at him searchingly, hardly having recognized him as he entered.

"Why, Trim, my dear fellow, what's happened to you?"

"Never mind about me. I've come to tell you that there's some devil's own work going on! It may be now even too late to stop it!"

With the words, used up by the exertion of his hunt after The Hound, the reporter threw himself into a chair, completely out of breath.

CHAPTER X.

STRIKING A NEW TRAIL.

It was some minutes before Trim Taskar could get his breath to speak further.

"Devil's work, Trim?" repeated the detective.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"Explain."

"There's a house on Franklin street that will be the scene of a murder if somebody doesn't stop it."

"Out with the whole of it. Be more lucid."

Trim rapidly related the singular and animated tableau he had witnessed.

"She was a beautiful girl, you say?—the one you saw lying on the cot."

"As lovely as could be imagined."

"And a man, who looked like an arch-villain, standing at the door?"

"Yes."

"Well, it does look plotty. But why did you not take this to the police?"

"I believe there is more back of the scene that the police might overlook in their haste to stop it; whether they did or not, I think as you do—it looks plotty."

"Like work for a detective, eh?"

"Yes."

"And suppose it is. Where does my fee for labor come from?" the last jocularly.

"I know you, I guess, Mr. Hound. You are not the man to let a crime go on because there does not happen to be any one to pay for services."

"You are right, Trim."

Then a sudden thought entered the detective's mind.

"Take a look at this" he said.

"What is it?"

"I want you to look."

He had drawn from his pocket the photo-crystal type obtained from Girard Ardway.

No sooner did the reporter's glance rest on it than he uttered a low cry.

"What is the matter?"
 "Why, Mr. Hound, the very girl!"
 "What girl?"
 "The one I saw in the house on Franklin street. I'd swear to it!"
 "Color of her eyes, and all?"
 "Well, now, I wasn't close enough to decide about color of eyes. But the face—"
 "Is it the same?"
 "Positively, yes."
 The Hound was now deeply interested. Perhaps, by a lucky accident, he had struck the trail of Nell Deems, the missing shop-girl.
 "I will attend to this at once, Trim. Now, here is an item for you. I suppose other papers will have it, so the *Picayune* might as well get it too."

To the surprised reporter he gave some brief points in regard to the supposed Ardway murder.

When Trim, highly elated, started for the *Picayune* office, Harry Hound left the agency to investigate the mystery at the voodoo dwelling.

It was near day dawn when he returned. Trim Taskar was awaiting him. The reporter was anxious to know what Harry Hound had done. In this he was to be disappointed.
 "You have started me on a curious affair Trim."
 "Find out anything?"
 "Oh, yes."
 "But you don't want to let me in."
 "That's about it. There's no white girl at the house on Franklin street—"
 "But I tell you I'll swear—"
 "Never mind about the swearing. I only want you to keep absolutely close-mouthed about this thing for the present. I promise that in due time you will have a good sensation out of it."

"All right. That's fair."
 The detective had made a strange discovery, considering the strongly assured information received from Trim. Exactly what it was will be revealed in due progress.

Giving instructions to be awakened, punctually at the end of three hours, he threw himself on a lounge in the rear office of the agency to snatch a little needful rest.

By nine o'clock in the morning we find him active again, and in the vicinity of the dingy rum shop before mentioned on Franklin street.

But no one would ever have recognized the famous detective in his new role.

He was the veriest negro among them all. Attired in a sailor-like suit, and with face and hands admirably blackened, he was soon known as belonging to one of the St. Louis packets; had just been paid off, and spent his wages freely among the whisky-drinking denizens.

The news of a death having occurred in the voodoo doctress's house was being discussed extensively.

Prominent among the gossipers on the subject was a white man with a rubicund nose, who presented a fair specimen of how low a human may sink when "sold out," body and soul, to the demon of rum. They called him "The Doctor."

The Hound quickly found that this inebriate knew more than any one else about matters at the somber dwelling.

Getting him to one side, the detective proceeded to "pump" him.

"Say, boss, who's died up to the woodoo's?"
 "Ah, my sable brother, there's where I am perplexed. A young girl, though."

"A gal? Little or big gal?"

"And now you've got me again. I haven't seen her. I only know she was a granddaughter of the chief voodoo, Black Zela. Nobody ever knew she had a granddaughter, much less that she was in the house, until the death happened."

"An' what kill de gal, boss?"
 "Consumption, sir black."
 "How you knows?"
 "Why, I wrote the certificate."
 "Oh, you prac'ses med'cin' den?"

"Certainly. I am a regular graduate. My patrons are these people around here. Everybody patronizes 'The Doctor'—and they are good pay, sir, good pay."

The disguised detective was immensely disgusted. Here was a medical practitioner, vile of habit as the drunken negroes of the surrounding in which he had his own abiding place, who had given a regular certificate of death by consumption, without having so much as attended the patient living, or looked at the body dead.

Had the money of Black Zela accomplished this bribe? Was it not likely that the negress of supernatural profession was but the instrument of a more ingenious brain, which had foreseen the ease by which "The Doctor" of Franklin street could be bought to blindly serve a plot?

"Whar dey's goin' to berry de gal at?"
 "Well, you see there's been a new lot lately bought and opened near the Half-way House, to be used as a colored cemetery."

"Goin' to put her out dar?"
 "Yes, I believe so."
 "When?"

"This afternoon. But, look here, my friend, you seem to be very inquisitive."

"Oh, I'se jes' talkin'. Les' take a drink."

"Always agreeable," signified "The Doctor," with a toper's dignity.

They sought the sloppy bar, and indulged in some of the horrid stuff there dispensed—at least the disguised detective pretended to swallow his portion.

The pseudo sailor from the St. Louis packet presently disappeared, much to the regret of sundry loafers. He hunted up the managers of the new negro cemetery. From them he learned that a corpse was expected to arrive on that afternoon, from somewhere on Franklin street. Pretending to have a personal interest in the funeral, he succeeded in having a glimpse of the exact spot where the dead girl was to be entombed.

At about the stroke of midday, the door-bell of No. — Prytania street was rung, and the servant admitted Hank Hound, in *propria persona*.

"I wish to see Mr. Ardway."

Royal promptly came forward, and the two ascended to the library.

"Any visitors?" inquired the detective, off-hand.

"Two or three."

"Who more particularly?"

"The police lieutenant who was here last night."

"Ah!"

"It seems he had forgotten, last night, to ask to see the body. He appeared to be worried by some newspaper report and the fact that an abduction prevented any actual evidence that a murder had been committed."

Harry laughed lowly. As he had foreseen, there occurred a breeze of dismay at police-head-quarters when Trim Taskar's startling report in the *Picayune* for the first time opened their eyes to their singular remissness.

"On this visit the lieutenant was particular to ask what had been stolen, too," added Royal.

"You told them?"

"Yes."

"Well, that will do no harm—it seems to have been necessary."

"Have you accomplished anything, Mr. Hound?"

"I think I have. I can only say that I believe I am on the scent of the plotters."

"You are?"

"I have some very strong theories, at least."

"And you think there is a plot, then?"

"Oh, I have positive evidence of that in my pocket this minute."

The detective alluded to the mysterious warning he had received from unknown parties appealing themselves the Owls of New Orleans.

"Now to business, Mr. Ardway," pausing.

"I would like to hear anything you have to say."

"I must have access to this house in a way that will give me full, free range of it without exciting any suspicion of my objects. It will be easily managed. If you will observe closely, you will see that you and I are of about the same physique. I can easily alter my face, hair and voice to match yours."

"You propose—"

"To pass for Mr. Royal Ardway—not continuously, but at intervals. Understand?"

"Perfectly."

"To begin with, you must show me over the premises, so that I will be entirely familiar."

"Come, then. But of myself during these intervals?"

"I shall take the liberty of making you a prisoner in hiding."

Harry was shown about the house until he felt as much at home as if he had lived there all his life.

It was not a secret that detectives were working on the Ardway case.

Returning to the library, the detective said:

"Now come and take a walk with me."

The two went out together.

CHAPTER XI.

A WOMAN'S AVOWAL.

SHORTLY after the departure of Royal and the detective, the handsome private coach belonging to Miss Crystol was brought to the front by her order.

Entering it she was driven rapidly away.

When the coach stopped it was before the Clyde cottage.

The young music-teacher had returned from her morning visits to the residences of her pupils; she and her mother were about to sit down at their humble dinner-spread, when there came a peremptory rap on the cottage door.

"Continue your meal, my child, I will see who it is," said Mrs. Clyde.

She was surprised upon beholding the brilliant equipage outside and the lovely-faced young lady confronting her on the steps.

"Madam, what is your name, if you please?"

"Clyde."

"Ah! Have you a daughter grown?"

"Yes."

"Then it is she whom I wish to see. Can I have a private conversation with her?"

"Certainly. Walk in."

Mrs. Clyde supposed it to be a new applicant for instructions in music, who had preferred seeing for herself the teacher she intended engaging.

She courteously ushered the visitor into the cosy little parlor and hastened to inform Isabel.

A few moments later the two young girls were facing one another alone.

Isabel could not help acknowledging to herself the striking beauty of her caller.

"You are Miss Clyde?" Edna said, with her black-agate eyes fixed searchingly upon the young music-teacher.

"That is my name. What will you have?"

"I have called to speak with you concerning Mr. Royal Ardway."

"Royal!" fell half involuntarily from Isabel's lips, in surprise.

There was a transient sneer in Edna's face.

"Yes, of him. It would seem that you and he are engaged to be married—"

"Pardon me—but who are you, that you have any interest in Mr. Ardway's affairs and mine?"

"My name is Crystol—Edna Crystol. I am the adopted ward of Girard Ardway, Royal's father."

"Well, Miss Crystol?"

"To be brief, I have come here to warn you that you must give up your adventurous aspirations for wealth and station."

"I do not understand you," was the quiet, dignified rejoinder.

"You and Royal must not marry."

"Why not, pray?—if we are perfectly satisfied, mutually."

Edna having announced herself as the ward of Girard Ardway—of whom Royal had made mention—Isabel maintained a polite demeanor toward her, notwithstanding this impertinent introduction of a subject sacred to the lovers themselves.

"There is good reason why you, an obscure girl, should renounce the hope of being wedded to Royal Ardway."

"Will you please to name that reason?"

"Because I love him."

As Edna thus declared, her eyes evinced a gathering of passion in their depths, as if her nature would next minute flash forth to meet an expected angry outburst from the astounded young music-teacher.

"You love him?"

"I spoke plain enough."

"And does Royal—is he aware of your attachment—"

"That is neither here nor there. I love him; it is sufficient. You must give him up."

"But I shall do nothing of the kind," was the sudden, flat, decisive reply.

"You will not?"

"No, Miss Crystol."

"You are a stubborn thing."

"I have given my heart to Royal Ardway at his own wooing," Isabel said, calmly but red-denning at the other's tone. "If he shall choose to deceive me and fling it back why, then—"

"Then you will, I suppose, sue for breach of promise and drag the name of Ardway through the mire of the courts."

"You are mistaken in my character from first to last, Miss Crystol. If you love Royal Ardway—win him. I would not wish to retain a fettered affection. But my love is too deep and strong to be set aside for such a reason as you give—indeed, what you suppose to be a reason only seems to me absurd; and if you are loving him, unloved in return, you should blush to apprise me of it. I have listened to you thus far, not wishing to wound the feelings of one bearing the family relations to Royal which you do. I decline to hear any more."

It was evident that Isabel possessed spirit. She arose while delivering the short-accented speech, signifying a determination to end the interview.

"Stay!" Edna said, imperatively.

"I will not listen to any more on the subject, Miss Crystol," firmly.

"Have you read this morning's paper?"

"I have."

"Then you saw an account of the mysterious disappearance—or perhaps murder—of Girard Ardway."

"Mother and I were discussing the sad affair as you came in."

"Do you know, Miss Clyde, that the authorities are even now strongly suspecting Royal of having destroyed his father to get the inheritance?"

"Why, such a thing is preposterous!"

"Nevertheless, the law shows no partiality to station in dealing with criminals."

More intense grew the gazing orbs of Edna Crystol.

"What do you mean?" Isabel half-gasped.

"I mean this: You will find, before long, Royal Ardway in jail, arrested upon the charge I am now but hinting. Strange information regarding him has already been received by the police. Once arrested, a sufficient motive for the deed will easily be found."

"Merciful heavens! what imaginings are these of yours?"

"Not imaginings, Miss Clyde."

"They must be."

"No—stern facts."

Edna arose and took a step toward her rival, confronting her almost fiercely.

"I must speak plainer, I see, for you to comprehend the situation," she cried. "Royal Ardway is completely in my power."

"In your power?" echoed Isabel, dazedly.

"I can give evidence which will almost of itself convict him of the heinous crime!"

"You, Miss Crystol?"

"Yes, I. Mark my words well. I can prove him a murderer, or"—her voice hoarse with a half-bridled passion—"I can shield him by throwing the officers on the track of others. Do not ask me how I am able to do this; suffice it that I can. I make no idle boast."

Isabel trembled in every fiber. She had no voice for speech as she began to comprehend the meaning of the strangely beautiful being with a volcano in her soul.

"Does it dawn upon you, Miss Clyde?—the extent of my power. Give up Royal Ardway, that I may win him; break your engagement in any way you choose. All will be well if you do: Royal is safe."

"And if I—"

"If you are so blindly stubborn as to refuse, I will ruin, blast, crush him, as sure as the sun shines—oh! I can do it! I swear to you I will do it!"

Isabel was tottering.

"More—and beware: if you so much as breathe a sentence of this interview to him, or any one else, then I shall send him to the gallows, whether you consent to renounce him or not. Be warned by this, too, therefore. You may have a little time to think over my proposition—I grant you that. Give him up and save him from an ignominious death, or cling to him and see him die! I will call upon you for your decision in a few days."

With a menacing gesture, the lovely demon swept from the room and from the house.

The showy coach drove off.

For some moments Isabel stood as if stupefied, speechless, staring at vacancy. One hand clutched tightly over her palpitating heart, one hand pressed hard upon her white brow, where the brain seemed fairly reeling under the terrible disclosure and threat uttered by the ward of Girard Ardway.

"Royal—a murderer!" she faltered, chokingly. "No—no—I will not think of such a monstrous thing. Oh, Heaven! my love—for—his—life. It would kill me to give him up now. What—what shall I do?"

"Do as your pure and loyal heart dictates, my child," said the grave voice of Martha Clyde, who came slowly into the room.

"Mother!—oh, mother!"

Isabel ran to her, throwing herself with a sobbing outburst, into her arms.

"I have heard all, dear child. A wicked woman is she who came here. We will tell Royal everything that has passed—"

"But you heard what she threatened?"

"Yes. But fear not. I can match her."

"You, mother?"

"Even I, Bella. There is that in my power to do which will utterly confound this Edna Crystol. I had hoped there never would be a cause for me to go back through the vale of years to bring up a matter long buried, even though I remain cognizant of a wrong being perpetrated. But to preserve your happiness, I must, I shall, act. You have more right, Isabel, to be the ward of Girard Ardway, at this minute, than the girl who calls herself Edna Crystol. Wait patiently; leave all to me. And I say to you, fear not."

"Why, mother, what can you mean?"

"I mean that she is an impostor, and I can tear her down as easily as a cobweb from the wall!"

Martha smiled down with a mysterious assurance upon the daughter who held all the sympathy of a mother's boundless love.

CHAPTER XII.

PLAYING THE GAME.

UPON returning to the mansion, Edna Crystol found a visitor awaiting her in the small reception parlor at the back of the hall.

It was Silas Margrip.

He had been about the most astonished man in New Orleans when he read the account of the Ardway mystery in the *Picayune*.

As Edna entered, he rose with his foxy grin and sinuous manner.

"Ah! Good-day to you, my dear young lady," rubbing his fingers through and through like a bunch of eels, as he bowed.

"Well, sir?" spoke Edna, icily.

Margrip looked a little taken aback at her tone.

"Ahem! Remarkably sad affair, this—About Mr. Ardway, I mean. Yes, very. I sympathize with the family. *Cura et valeas.*"

"Who are you, sir?"

Judging by the expression of countenance, this haughty accented question seemed to strike Margrip like a smack in the face.

"Why, bless me! my dear young lady, what do you mean?"

"I? Mean? Are you a lunatic?"

The lawyer stared blankly, then managed to stammer:

"I see, I see. You are inclined to be playful with old Silas. Yes, I see. But, oh, come, now, if you are elated at your grandly elevated fortune, you must not try to make me believe you have forgotten your promise."

"My promise?"

"Why, yes—ahem!—your promise when I first saw you in St. Louis."

"I was never in the city of St. Louis."

"What nonsense, now, my dear young lady! In St. Louis, you promised—and you know it well—to pay me \$5,000 as soon as you were safely installed as the ward of Girard Ardway. I think the time has arrived for payment. I am ready to receive it. Behold me. I am here—I am yours truly. *Fortiter, fideliter, feliciter.*"

"What are you talking about? Do you know who I am?"

"The honored Miss Edna Crystol, heiress. For which, thanks to me, Silas Margrip."

"You have made a mistake."

"Indeed? How very playful you are, my dear young lady."

"I am by no means in a playful mood, sir. It would appear that somebody has been making you promises of some kind. You are possessed with an absurd idea of my being that somebody."

Silas was decidedly astonished by her earnestness.

"You say your name is Margrip—"

"How well you ought to know that. *Fortuna sequatur.*"

"I never knew any one by that name."

"But—but—"

"I never laid eyes upon you before in all my life."

"Oh, but—*Flebite ludibrium!*" Silas spluttered amazedly.

"And as I think you must be some deplorable crazy man, I shall have you put out at once, before your insanity assumes a harmful phase."

She stepped toward the bell-rope with outstretched hand.

"Stop—stop!" he cried; "no need of that. I will depart. I plainly perceive I have been an old ass. Yea—*fronti nulla fides.* I go, Miss Crystol. Ahem! Never mind about the bell-rope."

Silas hurried from the house. Out on the steps he struck the crown of his hat a bang with his palm, mumbling:

"I'm dropped—bounced! It's not fair. I'm beat—beat out of \$5,000. I might have expected it. Put Silas Margrip down: dolt, fool, ass. *Fœdum ineptu, fœdum exitu!* She feels safe, defiant in her inheritance; Ardway is murdered, and the first will stands, which makes her joint-heir. She won't recognize me at all; she coolly throws me over. But the will—ho, ho! I have the will—ha, ha! Now, if I had the adoption papers—ahem! if I had the adoption papers—if I had the—"

The words died slowly on the lips of foxy Silas Margrip as he strode away, and he stroked his pointed nose with a new, deep reflection.

As the lawyer departed, Royal Ardway descended from the library. He met Edna at the parlor-door.

"Oh, Royal!" she exclaimed, hastening to him impulsively.

Twining her bewitching arms around his neck and turning a face of eager yearning up to his, she said abruptly:

"Do not disgrace yourself, Royal, dear."

"Disgrace myself?"

"Yes."

"I have no such intention if it can be avoided, I assure you."

"Yet you are in danger of doing it."

"Why, in what way, Edna?"

There was a tighter clinging of the arms, her perfumed breath was fanning on his face. There could be no misunderstanding the fact that this lovely being had conceived an ardent passion for him.

"When you marry, Royal, it should be with one who will not drag you down from society and the pleasant accessions of wealth, but who can meet you half way."

"I hope the lady may be such a one," he agreed, smiling.

"Then why throw yourself away upon a poor and obscure music-teacher?"

"A music-teacher?" he repeated.

"You know of whom I speak—Miss Clyde."

"Oh, Miss Clyde, eh?"

"Yes."

Edna eagerly construed, from his careless reception of the subject, that perhaps, after all, Miss Clyde was not so wholly the captor of his heart as at first appeared.

"What of Miss Clyde, Edna? Ah! you have been to see her."

"I have."

"You are teasing."

"No. I have just come from her home."

"I'll wager a box of kid gloves you do not know where she lives."

"Yes, but I do."

"Where?"

Edna gave the address correctly.

What more might have passed between the passionate, beautiful, scheming girl and the man she had chosen to love, was interrupted by a peal at the door-bell.

She left his side, and hastened up the staircase.

Charles Courtley entered—or, as we shall continue to know him better, Percy Desmond, The Prince.

"Hello, Royal, my boy, going out?"

"Just on my way for a walk."

"Well, I'll accompany you. I wished to see you particularly."

The two had met before on that day, and the sad mystery of Girard Ardway's disappearance was fully discussed as far as delicacy would permit.

On the street Desmond continued:

"I have something of special importance to speak about. Have you telegraphed for your sister, Clarice?"

"Yes."

"I supposed you would, of course. It is of her I wish to speak."

"Well, what about Clarice?"

"It will surprise you greatly, I know, to hear that I already have the pleasure of her acquaintance."

"Is it possible?"

"Quite."

"You never mentioned it—"

"And I hardly know why I did not."

"What were you going to say?"

"I love your sister."

"This is an astonisher."

"True, I assure you. I was visiting in the city of Baltimore at the time of being honored by an introduction; she had not long been an attendant at the finishing academy there. I at once confessed to myself that I loved her, and commenced paying my earnest addresses, which, I had reason to think, were not distasteful to her. Business suddenly called and has kept me away from that city ever since, unfortunately."

The Prince might have more truly said that his reason for a hurried departure from Baltimore was, the police detectives had spotted him as a suspicious character!

Royal was in complete ignorance of the true scale of his adventurer friend.

"Now, Royal, in the existing unhappy state of affairs, you are the only one I can speak to regarding my desire to resume my addresses to Clarice and, if she is still heart free, ask her to be my wife."

"That is all right, Charlie. If you can win Clarice, do so. I believe you are a first-rate good fellow."

"You will aid me in my suit?"

"Reasonably, yes."

Royal seemed anxious to be rid of his companion, and soon separated from him upon some slight excuse. As he walked on alone, he muttered:

"Edna Crystol is in love with Royal—he is in love with a certain Miss Clyde. I should have been advised of this. I might have tripped up."

The voice did not belong to Royal Ardway.

It was "The Hound," who was thus, with consummate skill, playing the deceptive part we have seen him map out for himself.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LINK AND A SURPRISE.

"MISS CLYDE and Miss Crystol are rivals," continued Harry Hound, musingly, to himself. "Miss Crystol had just returned from a visit to the young lady who disputes the claim to Royal's affection. I am curious to know what was the object of that visit. I will interview Miss Clyde."

By the trick of the wager we have seen how easily the masquerading detective obtained Isabel's address.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, suddenly.

He had made a discovery. He was being followed. To be certain of this he made several aimless turns and loiterings. There could be no doubt of it. In his disguise as Royal Ardway he was being "shadowed."

At first the knowledge brought a frown to his face.

"So Royal Ardway, whom I am mistaken for, is being watched, eh? The hint received at police headquarters is being acted upon."

Then his face cleared at a new thought.

"All right—I've no objection. This may prove rather advantageous to me. When Royal himself is abroad these fellows will follow him; that will keep them out of my way."

Calling a cab and giving directions to the driver, he was soon landed before the Clyde cottage.

As he was admitted, Isabel, her face still wet from recent weeping, would have embraced him with all the gladness of a child.

"Hold!" he interposed, putting out one hand, while with the other he pushed the door shut behind him.

"Why, Royal, what does this mean?" wavered the girl.

"You are deceived."

"Deceived?"

"I am not Royal Ardway."

His disguise must indeed have been perfect to so utterly defy the keenly perceptive eyes of a loving girl.

Harry was too honorable to permit the embrace he knew was meant for another.

Mrs. Clyde, who was dressed as if on the point of going out, came into the entryway at the moment of the announcement.

"I am not Royal Ardway."

"Then who are you, sir?—and what is the explanation of this?" she demanded, sharply.

"My name is Hound; I am a detective."

"A detective!"

Both grew pale at this ominous introduction and the motion which exhibited the bright badge beneath his vest lapel.

"Yes, ladies. I have called to make a few business inquiries."

"Please to state their nature," spoke Mrs. Clyde, warily.

"I think Miss Edna Crystol visited this cottage to-day—you know her? I wish to know exactly what she came for. It is of professional importance to me."

Mother and daughter exchanged glances.

"Step this way, sir," Mrs. Clyde said, briefly, in the tone of one having formed a resolution in the moment.

She led him into the modest little parlor, Isabel following.

There, and in a few minutes, he was informed, almost verbatim, of the scene that had transpired between Edna and Isabel.

Then, women-like, they wanted to know his object in seeking the information, and—detective-like—he politely evaded the question, assuring them, however, that while his operations in a measure concerned Royal Ardway, the young man was, in his firm opinion, entirely innocent of anything like what Miss Crystol had so significantly averred.

Leaving the cottage, he observed that the "shadow" was persistent on his track.

"I must drop that fellow," he muttered, as he entered his cab and was driven off. "And I don't think that matter will be very difficult."

The "shadow" had a cab near and was in immediate pursuit.

The method of the man who was playing spy was so broadly open that our detective concluded he must be a very green hand at the business.

When the cab containing the "shadow" wheeled around a certain corner, the cab supposed to be conveying Royal Ardway—who was plainly a suspected man—was a good half block ahead.

Standing and leaning idly against the awning-post of a grocery store, paring his finger-nails, and smoking a cigar, was Harry Hound himself, his coat even of a different color, wearing the tight cap that was a favorite with him—every particle of resemblance to Royal having vanished.

When cab No. 2 was out of sight on its goose-chase, the detective sauntered away, hailed another conveyance, and was driven to the St. Charles Hotel.

In the basement he encountered Trim Taskar.

"Trim, you're the very party I'm looking for."

"Well, here I am."

"I have something for you to do."

"Any thing in my power to serve you, Harry."

"Can you give me a few hours of your time to-night?"

"Cheerfully."

"Report to me at the agency at twelve, midnight. I have a ticklish job to perform, and will need help. No one will suit me as well as you."

"I'll be there, depend."

The Hound had a reason for preferring Trim's assistance in whatever he was about to do. It was a matter in which he did not care to share certain knowledge with any brother officer of the force.

He had half expected to find the reporter here, and having accomplished the meeting, was about to move away, when Trim suddenly caught him by the sleeve.

"Mr. Hound—look there!" he whispered, in a stagey voice.

"What's up, Trim?"

"That man over there, with the fawn-colored overcoat."

"Well?"

"He's wearing very different clothes, but I am sure of the face."

"Nothing extraordinary about his face, is there?"

"Yes, there is. There goes the identical person I saw looking in from the entry when the voodooes were dancing around the girl on the cot at the house in Franklin street."

"Sure?"

"My oath to it."

"I'll bear him in mind, Trim."

The man was The Prince, Desmond. Unconscious of the fact that he was being so keenly scrutinized, he walked on out of the hotel.

"Don't forget, Trim, to-night at twelve," admonished The Hound, moving off.

"Oh, I'll be on hand, never fear."

From this chance incident the detective gathered an important argument.

Desmond must have been an accessory, if not prime mover, in the mysterious disappearance of Nell Deems.

There could no longer exist doubt that there was foul play concerning her.

But what were Desmond's reasons for wishing to destroy a poor shop-girl?

Several, possibly.

First of these, he knew that Desmond, in his role of Charles Courtley, intended paying addresses, with view of marriage, to Clarice Ardway. Perhaps there was some tangling alliance between Nell Deems and the handsome adventurer, and the latter had not scrupled to arrange for the death of one whose existence endangered his plots.

Harry had in contemplation a singular undertaking inspired by this theory, in which Trim Taskar was to figure as an aid.

Shortly after leaving the reporter he met the police lieutenant, who was mixing himself up in the Ardway affair.

That officer was in noticeably high spirits.

"Ah, Mr. Hound, glad to meet you. Anything new in the Ardway case?"

"Nothing to give away just yet."

"I guess I am getting a little ahead of you."

"How so?"

"I have a bit of news for you about this murder case—"

"But how do you know it is a murder case?" chaffed Harry.

"Oh, come! you are having a joke out of our first oversight, I grant. But we have made up for it—more than made up—by what we have accomplished in a short space of time."

"Then you have accomplished something about the mystery?"

"Don't I tell you I have some news for you?"

"I would like to hear it."

"We've captured him."

"Who?"

"The burglar and assassin—if not the principal, at least one of his gang. He's an ugly one. Yes, sir, we've nabbed one of the Ardway murderers!"

This was undoubtedly news—surprising, incredible news for Harry Hound.

Could it be that all his theories were working on a false trail?—and the police were ahead of him in getting down to the nucleus of the mystery while he was ferreting through the channels of a deep and intricate plot?

For a full quarter minute he stared silently into the lieutenant's beaming face.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TALK WITH "CRACKER BILL."

THE lieutenant enjoyed the astonishment his words had caused.

"Are you quite sure, sir, that you are on the right track?" Harry asked.

"Oh, quite. You see, we obtained from Mr. Royal Ardway a description of some jewelry usually worn by his father and which had been stolen. The pawnbrokers were warned and furnished with written duplicates before eight o'clock this morning. And none too soon. A little after nine o'clock we were telephoned in a hurry from Conti street. Dispatched an officer there and nabbed our game in the act of haggling over a loan upon a piece of the missing jewelry."

"What was the article?"

"A diamond shirt-stud, with the letter 'A' on the back of the mounting."

"You searched the fellow for more, of course?"

"Yes, but that was all we found. Enough, isn't it, to prove that he must be more or less connected with the Ardway mystery?"

"Looks that way, truly."

Harry was somewhat surprised that he had not been advised of the presence of the man at the pawnbroker's, for he, too, had notified every shop on Royal, Conti, Bourbon and Baronne streets.

"What has your capture amounted to beyond this, lieutenant?"

"There is the trouble. I tell you he is an ugly one—sullen as a tiger, close-mouthed as a clam. Can't get anything but a growl out of him. Swears point-blank he'll die before he'll give anybody satisfaction."

"Look here, lieutenant, I would like to have a talk with him."

"Well, I don't see that there can be any objection. But if you expect to get anything out of him, I think you will find yourself fooled."

"Where have you got him?"

"He's at the station yet."

"I shall see him."

The detective went to the station forthwith. He was promptly conducted to the cell containing the latest important arrest when he made himself known.

Being admitted and left alone, the detective stood confronting the man whom the reader has had a glimpse of on the night Edna Crystol followed Royal Ardway like a spy to Clyde cottage.

The tigerish ruffian whom we know as Cracker Bill by his own appellation.

He was sprawled lazily on the rough camp

cot. Upon beholding the intruder, he started to a sitting posture and growled:

"Wot!—ain't you gents come to the 'clusion yet it ain't no use a-tryin' to drag my tongue loose? Wot do you want now, anyway, say?"

Harry quietly folded his arms and surveyed the uncouth prisoner.

"Well, you do look hard enough to have committed the murder, that is a fact."

"Murder!" exclaimed Bill, in evident astonishment.

"Yes, it was awfully cold-blooded."

"Wot air you talkin' about?"

"How many times did you stab your victim?"

"Stab! How many times did I— Say, you can't get nothink out o' me by your trick talk, so you'd as well give it up."

"What is your name, my man?"

"I'm Cracker Bill, from Floridy. I'm a boss alligator. I kin tell you that much."

"Now, Cracker Bill—just for a friend, you know—what did you do with the body of Mr. Ardway after you murdered him?"

The blear eyes distended; the giant jaw, with its unkempt beard, dropped till his wide round mouth yawned.

As if a sudden light had dawned upon him, he drawled, in a high, nervous key:

"Great alligators! Hev I been slammed in heyr for a murder—say?"

"That's the size of it. Guess you were not asleep when it happened," coolly said the detective.

"Why, I'm innercent—jest as innercent as a six-weeks crockerdile."

"You'd better be hunting up some proof of it then; the proof is now decidedly the other way. The chances are you will have a very short trial, a quick conviction, and then a free ride in the air," and The Hound made a significant circular motion with the index finger around his neck.

The shrewd detective saw that Cracker Bill had not so much as heard of the murder. He was under the impression that he had only been arrested upon the suspicious circumstance of a rough tramp, such as he was, being possessed of and trying to pawn a valuable diamond. But how had he obtained the gem? The detective was now playing to learn this.

The blank look of mingled astonishment and dismay depicted in the visage of the "boss alligator" was too genuine to be mistaken.

"Now, my friend from Florida, as it is a settled fact that you will be hung—"

Bill broke in with a loud snort:

"Hang me, when I ain't done nothin'!"

"Yes, but you have."

"Hope to die if I've brok'd the law since I struck Louzeanny."

"You killed a gentleman named Ardway; you robbed him, too; you were caught in the act of pawning some of the jewelry taken from his person—"

"Say!"

"What is it?"

"D'you take the boss alligator o' Floridy for a jackass fool?"

"Why?"

"D'you think I'd kill a gent then po'ka roun' the town where I murdered him at, a-hawkin' an' peddlin' his bobs?"

Cracker Bill appeared disgusted that such a thing should be thought of him.

"You want me to believe you did not kill Mr. Ardway?"

"No more did I—nor nobody else. Cap, I swore I wouldn't give them police any satisfaction outen me. I know'd I hadn't done nothink, when all to a sudden—wot!—heyr you air a-talkin' 'bout me killin' somebody. I'm a goin' to confess right up, I am. 'Cause why? Things is gettin' a sort o' a dubious aspec'. 'S-s-t! Come an' squat on me oriental otterman heyr."

He thumped in pats on the scant-covered couch, inviting the detective to a seat.

Harry Hound obligingly seated himself beside the man, who laid a huge dirty hand on his visitor's knee in a confidential way.

"Who air you, anyway, Cap?"

"Well, I am a detective."

"An' so I thort—shake! I'm a alligator, I am, a boss from Floridy."

They shook hands. Harry had an object in humoring him.

"Now, I am a-goin' to sing the thing out square to save my neck."

"Don't tell any lies about it," suggested the detective.

"Wot!—me lie? Hope I may die if I do. 'Cause why? The naked truth is my best holt in this heyr case. Now, then, where did I git the diamond' stud at, wot I was a-tryin' to pawn—say?" and Cracker Bill, with a comically wise look, paused as if he expected the other to guess the riddle instantan.

"Oh, I give it up," rejoined The Hound.

"Lis'en unto me, then. Two nights back I was a-hagin' onto the wake of a fellow wot meandered his way outen Pr'tania street. I was dead bu'sted an' lookin' fur a opportunity to raised me pile, an' as he was rigged in tonny togs, says I: 'Cracker Bill, down that chap an' rake in all the wealth 'e carries.' D' you see? I follered 'im to a cottage, an' when he come

out it was late, an' says I: 'Now for me sufferin' pockets—down 'e goes! But, blast the luck! there was a female woman a-follerin' of him, too, which I had noticed her when goin' there. I hadn't thort she'd 'a' been sn'akin' after him yet, but she was right there. Cap, I hev a timid spot in me heart—I was too timid to smash that feller's noddle while havin' a witness by. D' you see?"

"Oh, yes, I see. You are a very unassuming fellow."

"Hev my thanks. But lis'en. As that there female hoofed it past the place where I was a hidin' at, I heard her mutterin' like she was all-fired mad at that partic'lar gent an' mighty mad 'ith some other shemah, an' by the way 'at she gabbed, I corncluded she'd be 'bout as happy as a pig in a pud-muddle if she could find a individual who would be willin', for a consid'ration, to punch that there young gent into a eternal pone-dough. Heyr was the starin' opportunity, d' you see, to make a pile by hirin' of myself to a woman w'ot might want fightin' done. So I lights out peart an' follers the she-male—"

"Where to?"

Bill gave the number of the mansion on Prytania street.

"Did you get a glimpse of her face?"

"Nary glimpse, Cap. An' I was hangin' round the edges like, tryin' to think w'ot I was goin' to do to identify 'er an' make a business propersition, when 'long comes a man w'ot unlocks the garding gate an' goes in, same's if he lived there, an' who never seen me onc't in the shadder by the wall. But, Cap, you can't fool the boss alligator from Floridy—nary—no. I've seen a heap, I have, an' when I caszh'y observed this feller's ways, which was more like a cotton-hoofed spook, I reckoned he was on the sweet lay for makin' wealth by the takin' of it. Now, I ain't the honestest alligator in Floridy, if I am the boss, I admit square. I fear'd the spooky chap might haul out too much to carry all alone hisself. Hence why, I up an' toed it after him. He moved across the garding till he came plum' clos't to the wall o' the house where there wasn't no door at all; an' then, Cap, he jest—spfst!—now you see it, now you don't—he vanished!"

"The man vanished?"

"Straight for gospel—wanished frum all wiszhun of the yearth!"

"That was strange."

"That there thing so kaboozled me 'at I jest put in two whole hours—not a fracshun less, a-tryin' to find out where the cuss had went to. An' while I was a-glidin' an' snailin', Injun-like, aroun' an' roun' the garding, a-huntin' for somethin' I couldn't see, all on a sudden—so help me snakes!—I came nigh bein' run down by a owl w'ot had outgrowed the size o' nature. Yes, Cap, a owl's head, fur a fac'—but it had a man's legs, an' them same legs was a-goin' it fur all they was wuth. I'm nat'rally o' a timid nature, as I says: an' whenever I sees a man runnin' I allus think the police 'r' a-comin'. Likewise I follered Mr. Owl, an' my shanks isn't bad on a gallop I kin tell you. Jest outside the garding gate, fast as I was a-goin' it, too, I spied a gleamin' objec'. I was born an' grow'd up 'ith a curiosity fur gleamin' objec's. I stopt long 'nough to grab the thing up. Cap, it was the diamond shirt-stud. I was a-congratulin' of myself this mornin', an' was jest considerin' w'ot was best to do with me capital—buy a steam packet or run for a councilman—when I was nabbed, hauled, took in, embraced by a man lover in blue an' buttons. There's the whole thing."

The tale came straight, without a stumble. Cracker Bill was telling the truth, and it carried conviction.

CHAPTER XV.

SPOTTING A QUARRY.

ACCEPTING the recital of Cracker Bill as a verity, the detective was furnished with a new and striking base for theory.

Bill's statement regarding the mysterious female who followed Royal would accord with Josette's information of her mistress's secret departure in disguise from the Ardway mansion. Edna had boasted to Isabel that she held Royal in her power, and could throw the officers of the law successfully on the track of others for the solvance of the Ardway tragedy.

To do this, she must have some strong grounds for action, and whatever her knowledge, she was determined to use it either for the annihilation of Isabel Clyde's sacred love, or against Royal himself, in her desperate desire to win the young man.

Did she at that moment know who it was that had made off with, and perhaps murdered, Girard Ardway?

"You say you saw the man—the one with the owl's face—run from the garden?"

"Sure for a fac'—an' me after 'im."

"And he was alone?"

"Lonely as the owl w'ot 'e 'peared to be. Lookt like 'e couldn't spare no time fur to pick up comp'ny."

"Was he carrying anything?"

"Nary carry. If he went fur to get plunder 'e must 'a' drapt it, that's all."

"Nothing whatever in his arms, or slung over his back?"

"Nary slung."

This statement presented a new suggestion.

If the predatory man-owl departed alone and empty-handed from the mansion, Girard Ardway, alive or dead, must still be within the building.

There had been no possible opportunity since the first hour of the mystery to secretly remove such a cumbersome thing as a corpse.

Almost the first move The Hound had made was to place a trusty assistant in such a position that every one and every thing entering or departing from the Ardway residence would be readily noted and reported.

"Well, Cracker Bill, I am inclined to swallow this story of yours."

"It's the naked truth—hope to die if 'tain't!"

"And now you must do me a favor."

"W'ot is it? Behold me rags! Do I look like a feller w'ot can do favors?"

"Do not repeat to any one what you have told me, and I'll give you a twenty."

"Hey?—twenty dollars?"

"Yes. Here it is in advance."

The detective drew forth a crisp note and displayed it temptingly—temptingly for such an impoverished tramp as was the boss alligator of Florida.

"But— Why, say, this heyr thing wouldn't do at all."

"Why not?"

"S'posen I keeps my meat-trap shet, when heyr I am jugged fur a hangin' matter, as you says. Looks to me like I'd best be spoutin' loud me unvarnisht argymet fur all 'at it's wu'th."

"Oh, that part will come all right."

"Y-a-s—s'posen so," with a ghoulis grimace.

"When I'm h'isted, you mean."

"No. I candidly believe you to be innocent as far as this murder is concerned. You have given me more valuable information than may at first appear. I am, as I told you, a detective. I am engaged on this very case—was engaged before they brought you in. I do not wish anybody else to get the points you have given me. I'll see that no harm comes to you, and give you a twenty. You won't suffer, except—"

"Cept w'ot?"

"You may be kept some time in jail; in fact, it is better for my purpose that you should. I may use you."

"Well, it ain't so bad in heyr, with reg'lar grub an' no killin' work fur to do, an' a man w'ot ain't got no wisible occypation."

"And I'll agree to pay you fifty cents a day for every day you are locked up."

The bleak eyes kindled greedily, and over the rough visage spread a broad grin.

"You mean this heyr, for sure?"

"Honor bright, old man."

"Cap, it's a barg'in—shake!"

Again the dirty paw of the boss alligator grasped the detective's hand.

"This heyr thing's about the mos' genteel job 'at I've struck sence I landed into Louzeanny. Twenty dollars down, fifty cents a day, rations fur nothink, an' no work to do. W'ot more kin man sigh fur? 'Sider me engaged. They'll never make no profit outen Cracker Bill. I'm bought right up."

Harry now congratulated himself upon being somewhat ahead of the prematurely jubilant lieutenant.

Not only was he satisfied that Cracker Bill had nothing to do with the Ardway mystery, but from the fellow he had gleaned several valuable points.

"How did you find him?" queried the officer in charge.

"Cross as a bear. Won't talk at all," was the reply, with an object.

At the Agency shortly thereafter, The Hound was handed a note requesting his presence at a pawnbroker's store on Baronne street.

Answering the summons without delay, the proprietor met him and said:

"How you was, Mr. Hound! Wear you haf been, eh? You get my note?"

"Yes; what's it about?"

"Aboud dose shewelry."

"Ah?"

"Dere was a man gomes fun my shtore leedle while ago und dry to get some money by dot diamond shtud business. I telephone mysellef at your places und you was oud. I send me a letter by de messenger."

Harry felt some vexation with himself at this. So there was another party trying to obtain a loan on a piece of the missing jewelry. Had he not been engaged in the cell with Cracker Bill at the time, he might have spotted this new man.

"What sort of person was he, Mr. Solomons? Describe him."

"Oh, he was a very nice mans. He haf a black mustaches, comb straight down, eyes so black like a coal, und he haf nice clodes und fawn-color overcoat fun de outsides."

The Hound could scarcely repress a start. Solomons was describing Prince Desmond, the adventurer!

"Did you lend him any money on the stud?"

"You dink I was crazy? Oh, no, Meester Hound. I wos in der backg room oud when he

gomes. My clerkg pring der shtud in wear I wos. So soon I see de letter 'A' by de backg mounting, I say rightd away gwick, we don't want dot shewelries—we haf too much diamonds all-a-ready. I telephone for you und you don'd gome. We keep dot man dalking till I wos so tired mysellef—und den he glears oud. Oh, no, I don'd puy dose stolen shewelries—I was too shmart for dot."

Leaving the German-Jew, Harry visited, in rapid succession, several other money-lenders' stores.

At two of these he heard of his quarry.

"Of dot man gomes some more dimes, we shall haf him arrested?" asked one of the brokers, after giving a similar description of the party who wanted to pawn the stud.

"No, not all," replied the detective. "That is not my game. I only wish to satisfy myself whether he is the party I think he is; I am not ready to haul him in yet, if he should be."

Next he sought a retired dwelling which seemed to be wholly unoccupied. But in the upper story there was a comfortably-furnished bedroom.

In this room was Royal Ardway, reclining on a lounge, reading.

"I'll let you have your liberty for a little while, now, Mr. Ardway."

"That is pleasant news. I was just growing tired."

"Make it a point to return to your home. By the by, I had better post you. You met Miss Crystol in the hallway this afternoon, just as she returned from a drive. She hugged and would have kissed you, had you permitted it, and seemed very anxious that you should give up your attachment for Miss Clyde, the music-teacher."

Royal frowned.

"I, too, had discovered, unfortunately, that she has conceived a passion for me, and I shall very abruptly nip the thing in the bud, I assure you. A fellow cannot very conveniently marry two women, you know. Wonder how in the world she found out about Isabel?"—the last more to himself.

The detective could easily have enlightened him, but he did not deem it advisable to acquaint him with the serious plot Edna was working to attain her supremacy in his preference.

"Another thing, Mr. Ardway: you must again seclude yourself before midnight to-night, and you cannot return here."

"Not here? Where, then?"

"Take this key and go, before the hour I name, to No. —, Baronne street. No one will interrupt you there. It is only office-furnished, but remain and make yourself as comfortable as you can for the night; for I will not be able to see you until morning. Something is about to transpire which will necessitate my using this room for another important purpose."

While speaking, he placed a latch-key in the young man's hand.

Harry Hound had keys to houses in various localities, well adapted to just such emergencies as this, and which served him as relays for the changing to different disguises when required.

It was almost nightfall when he separated from Royal Ardway.

He had particular arrangements to make previous to his prospective engagement with the reporter, Trim Taskar.

Among these was a hasty communication to the cab-driver, Jerry, whom we have seen serve the detective when the latter shadowed Edna Crystol to Jackson Square, and who was usually employed when The Hound required conveyance in his professional flittings.

The communication was a notice to be punctually at the agency at the hour of twelve, midnight.

The Hound knew he had work ahead; but this was to be a night of even greater developments than he anticipated.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FOX IN HIS DEN.

ON the afternoon that Harry Hound interviewed Cracker Bill in the station cell, Silas Margrip met with a somewhat astonishing experience.

The lawyer's office was literally "up an alley," the creaky door opening on a level with the narrow, unswept pavement.

It consisted of a single, small, square room, having but one window, the panes of which were thick with dirt; and the bare floor, the cheerless walls, against one side of which stood a dilapidated desk, and on another side the bed-lounge, where he was accustomed to sleep, with here and there a dangling cobweb, gave the place an appearance more like a lair than an office—the whole impressing with an idea of the occupant's miserly habits.

He entered his dim and dusty retreat, after transacting some court business, still possessed of the paramount but indefinite idea to be inferred from his thoughtful muttering when we last saw him leaving the Ardway mansion.

"If I only had the adoption papers," he repeated, over and over again.

He was deeply angered by what appeared to be a clean repudiation by Edna Crystol of any

obligation whatever to him, when he it was who had placed her in the way of a magnificent inheritance.

"It's too bad—outrageous!" he munched between his thin, compressed lips. "I won't stand it. Not a bit. I am not made of that kind of stuff. Ah! I have the will safe—the only existing will of Girard Ardway. Now, if I only had the adoption papers, and Ardway, who is already dead, dies intestate, as will appear, and without leaving anything to legally sustain the girl's claim in the estate—ahem! that will admirably reward her ungratefulness. Yes; I must devise a plan to get hold upon the adoption papers. *Occasio facit furem!* But how?—ahem! yes, how is it to be done? Let—me—see—" and seated before the rickety desk, with elbows propped, he scratched and coiled his eely fingers through his long hair in plotty meditation.

There was a rap at the door. Following the rap, a visitor entered.

It was Percy Desmond, The Prince.

"Hello!" he saluted, as if well-known to the lawyer. "Margrip, how are you?"

"Ahem! walk in. But I think I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"No? Well, that isn't so very strange, considering that we never met before."

"Ah! I thought so."

Desmond coolly helped himself to a chair, dragging it forward.

"What can I do for you, sir?" Margrip inquired.

"I have called to get Mr. Ardway's will."

"Hey?—eh?"

At this the lawyer stared.

"Mr. Ardway's will. You have it, I believe. You see, he had some curious quirk working in his brain when he last saw you. Almost as soon as you had left his house he thought better of what he had done, and concluded to let the original will stand. As I happened to make a call at the house just about that time, he asked it as a favor that I would seek you and request the immediate return of the will through me."

The lawyer feigned an increasing amazement. "Ahem!—yes. But, my dear sir, there is a big mistake somewhere."

"In what way?"

"Simply in that Mr. Ardway never gave me any will since I drew it up and handed it over to him for final signature and witnessing. I may add that I have reason for believing that he never did execute the will—tore it up, maybe."

"Oh, come, Margrip, that won't do."

"It will have to do, sir. And I don't like your familiarity, sir. I have no will. I can't understand what Mr. Ardway could have meant by sending you here upon such an errand—if he did do so. Besides were the will in my possession I assuredly would not give it to a stranger on his mere say-so; I would carry it to Mr. Ardway in person."

"And you know the latter to be impossible because of his mysterious death. Ah, Margrip, you are a sharp one."

"In some cases by a large majority," rejoined Silas, meaningly.

"Let us argue the point."

"No, sir. *Hic finis fandi!* I have no such paper as you refer to. I am very busy. Excuse me."

It was plain that Silas did not believe his visitor to be acting under any instruction from the deceased prior to death. Moreover he had resolved to hold the will.

He turned to his desk and began shuffling over some documents busily.

"Margrip, I must have that will."

If there had remained any doubt in his mind that this party wanted the will for purposes of his own, the doubt was instantly removed by the tone of the last uttered words.

"And I will get it," added The Prince, emphatically. "Now look here—you are a tolerably shrewd individual, and you have played a pretty fine game. The only trouble about the game is, there is one more interested in it, from the money-making point of view, than you counted on. I also hold a hand—I purpose turning a trump. We are both making a stake out of it, though not partners. You make it one way, I in another. There's a little cheating going on under the table, as it were. If you don't come out with the will, I give you fair warning, I shall expose the whole thing."

Margrip felt a slight inward thrill. He did not immediately look around at the speaker, but sat statue-still, weighing, analyzing in his quick brain what was unmistakably a serious threat.

"Ahem! You are talking in a most inexplicable manner, sir," he said, at last.

"Easily explained. You know—and I know, too, please remember—that the Edna Crystol adopted by Girard Ardway, is not the daughter of Colonel Crystol, for whom Mr. Ardway was looking."

"Why, this is sheer nonsense! What are you talking about, sir?"

"Not the least bit of nonsense. I'll tell you all about it. You went to St. Louis at Mr. Ardway's solicitation. You succeeded in finding a young girl whose name was Crystol. She did

not even bear the name of Edna, but she was known as Louie Crystol. She was an orphan; she had no recollection of her father and mother; she was eking out a livelihood, and a poor one at that, by coloring photographs. For a girl in her situation, it did not require any very exhaustive eloquence to convince her that her name was Edna—not Louie. She was quite delighted, and reasonably, to be informed that she was in reality the daughter of Colonel and Martha Crystol; that a wealthy gentleman wanted to adopt her as one of his heirs in token of his long friendship for the colonel. Oh, you persuaded her easily enough. She came on to New Orleans and is now known as Edna Crystol, the heiress. I presume you raked in a good fee by that little master-stroke. But, you see, you can't humbug me like you did Ardway, and like you did the girl. You have been well paid; your interest there ended with the payment. Ardway has instructed you to prepare another will, leaving Edna Crystol out of it. You, who love money well enough to sell your soul for it, are quite ready to do this thing. It must not be. You put that girl there; now she must stay. My game is to be played yet. Ardway's will must stand, and—you must place it in my hands, or I'll spoil the whole business and get you into a mess of trouble that will rout and ruin you. I guess you understand me."

The lawyer's action and reply, when he had heard the speech through, was clearly a huge surprise to Desmond.

He arose with a quick, jerky motion and leveled one eely finger toward the door.

"Clear out, sir! You are a rascal! This is the most consummate tissue of lies I ever heard outside of a court-room. Go—get out, or I'll call the police!"

"You absolutely refuse to give me the will?"

"I haven't any to give. Begone, you scoundrel!"

"Very well. We shall see."

The Prince hurriedly arose and left the office. His face wore a look of rage, and, mingling with the rage, a sardonic smile that boded evil for Silas Margrip.

If there was truth in what Desmond had said, charging Margrip's production of a false claimant to the beneficent intentions of Girard Ardway, then Silas must have felt remarkably secure in the plot, to so sternly defy the man who averred an intimacy with the crooked state of affairs.

Within the hour there was another rap at the door.

"Come in!" he snapped, crabbedly; for the more he pondered on the subject of his recent caller the more savage his mood became.

A woman, deeply veiled walked in.

She advanced to the chair, which was at once proffered.

"Be seated, madam. Pleased to see you. What can I do for you, to-day?" he said, his humor altered to a foxy blandness.

"You are Mr. Silas Margrip?"

"Yes, that is my name. *Audacter et sincere.*"

"You have dealings with, or are engaged professionally with a Mr. Ardway?"

"To tell the truth, I have not been his usual counselor."

"Usual," you say. But you have performed some recent service for him?"

"Well—a—yes. I am happy to say that through me a certain young lady was found, a daughter of an old friend of his, whom he wished to adopt as joint heir with his own children. That is about all. It is supposable that I might have served him further in the future but for the remarkable occurrence of his death. Ahem! yes. *Seriatim.*"

"I have called to speak regarding this very case—the young lady—"

"Beg pardon, but what did you say your name was?"

"My name is Martha Crystol. I was the wife of Colonel Bernard Crystol, who died in Missouri many years ago."

As she spoke, she drew aside her veil, revealing her face.

It was Mrs. Clyde, Isabel's mother!

Silas Margrip started back in his seat and stared at her as if she had thrown down and exploded a bombshell at his feet.

CHAPTER XVII.

REMARKABLE REVELATIONS.

RECOVERING with a gaspy breath from his overpowering amazement, the lawyer exclaimed:

"I hardly think I heard you aright, madam."

"My name is Martha Crystol," she repeated, more distinctly than before.

"But there must be some mistake."

"About my being that person?" with a slight smile.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Martha Crystol, the widow of Bernard Crystol, died in Missouri years ago."

"Oh, no, she did not—"

"And she left two children—orphans, daughters and twins. One of these children, Lucy by name, was long since supposed to be dead; the other, whose name was Edna, I found, at Mr.

Ardway's instigation, as he wished to, and did, adopt her as a ward. Ahem! yes. It's all straight. There's no doubt at all. *Ipsa facto.*"

"There are not only doubts, sir, but I must inform you that you are all wrong."

"Wrong, eh?"

Margrip knitted his brows.

"Quite so. I can readily comprehend, however, what has misled you."

"Oh, you can?"

"Will you listen to what I have to say?"

"Certainly, madam. Proceed."

"At the time Colonel Crystol went to Missouri to live, he had there a brother who was also a colonel in a Missouri regiment during the war. His name was Maynard."

"Maynard—Bernard," interpolated Silas.

"The names are apt to confuse, that's a fact."

"It was Maynard Crystol who had two daughters, twins, whose names were Louie and Lucy."

"Ah! Louie—"

"And Lucy. Maynard died, and shortly subsequent his widow, also. I took charge of the children at my husband's wish, though the brothers were not on friendly terms. The girl, Lucy, ran away from us when quite young. She was wayward and unmanageable always. Louie was the reverse, mild, good and affectionate. We then went to the city of St. Louis. Colonel Crystol, my husband, had met with heavy losses; we were suddenly very poor, and had determined to remove further West. One night the hotel at which we were temporarily stopping caught fire and was totally destroyed. Unfortunately my husband had that very day converted everything he owned into cash and drafts, in view of our starting for the West, and we lost all, every dollar, in the flames. Worse than that, he received injuries from a falling fragment of wall, which proved his death within a month following. The little girl, Louie, we knew to have perished. It happened that night she was sleeping, innocent darling! as bedfellow with a playmate to whom she was much attached, and neither was seen ever afterward."

"Madam, where have you lived during the past ten or twelve years?"

There was a sly light in Margrip's ratty eyes. In truth he half desired to credit his visitor's statement; a brilliant, cunning idea had entered his brain.

"My residence during that time has been here, in New Orleans."

"Singular that we were unable to find you, then. Mr. Ardway made a considerable outlay to ascertain all he could pertaining to Colonel Crystol's family."

"Not so strange, sir, for my real identity has been hidden under the name of Clyde."

"Oh, you call yourself Mrs. Clyde?"

"Yes."

"Can you establish the fact that you are Martha Crystol?"

"I can."

"Widow of Colonel Bernard Crystol?"

"Readily, if necessary—"

"Of course it will be necessary—of course," broke in Silas, jerkily, and as if it was settled to be done at once. "But, madam, permit me to ask why you have kept in concealment under a false name?"

"I have no objection to telling you. The reason is brief. Colonel Crystol had a most unhappy quarrel with his relatives because of his marriage with me. Impoverished though I was I was too proud to accept any assistance from his kinspeople, even had they offered it, which is doubtful. I had no relatives living. I was utterly alone, had a hard struggle before me in the world, and concluded it would be better for Martha Crystol to drop out of existence, as it were. The same pride which caused me to do this has also prevented my pushing forward my own child, when I was long ago apprised of the fact that Girard Ardway was seeking to make my daughter one of his heirs—"

"Stop, stop!" throwing up his head in a new, nervous surprise. "What's this about a child of yours?"

"Colonel Crystol and I had one child, a girl, whom we christened Edna. I succeeded in rescuing her from the burning hotel, because she slept in a crib at my bedside. At the same time I assumed the name of Clyde, I changed her name to Isabel."

"And she is now living?—this child?—Isabel—or Edna?"

"She is."

Silas sprung from his chair and paced to and fro over the bare floor in some excitement, his hands behind him, whisking his coat tail up and down.

The ratty eyes, the foxy features, the snake-lipped mouth, were involved in a broad grin of shrewd jubilation.

He was in sudden gay humor. Inwardly he was exclaiming:

"I want revenge upon the ungrateful girl—here it is within my grasp. *Hodie mihi, cras tibi!* Aha, beware! I can avail of it; I can tread upon her! Oho! Remarkable. Wonderful. By blazes! I hope it's all a fact. Look like it. Yes. *Argumentum ad judicium.*"

Then aloud:

"Madam, this has the appearance of being a plain case."

"Of imposture, yes."

"No, no, no," a little frightenedly. "There was no imposture intended. But the child I found was named Louie, though she insisted that I was wrong in saying her name ought to be Edna. She said she could remember a great fire, when she was extremely young, and that she lay for a long time in a big house containing a number of sick people—which I now see must have been a hospital. But the fright of that occasion, in her tender youth, and subsequent illness, I guess, explains why she retained no recollection of her father and mother; only knew that her name was Louie Crystol. I soon convinced her that her name was Edna, when I held out the brilliant prospects of becoming an heiress. There were reasonable grounds for my supposing her to be the child sought. Nothing underhanded, I assure you."

"I do not wish to intimate that there was anything more than an error," said Mrs. Clyde, mildly.

"And you can prove yourself—prove your child? How?"

"Colonel Crystol's relatives in Tennessee can not but bear convincing testimony as to who I am. I also have my marriage certificate. The church in St. Louis where Edna was christened when a baby must have a record of the christening."

"Did Colonel Crystol leave any will?"

"Not that I know of. What good would such a paper do in our circumstances?"

"I see—yes. Ahem! no use. Well—a—now—umph!"

A new and vexing thought seemed to present itself just then.

"What do you wish me to do?" he asked, keenly, after a pause.

"Do! Is not your duty plain?"

"Oh, yes, I know—yes. Ahem!"

He fidgeted uneasily. He was thinking of the \$5,000 really promised by the young girl when she should be duly installed as the heiress. There was still a chance of his getting that sum by withholding the will, and a certainty if, by any means, he could obtain the adoption papers. To drive out the false and install the new claimant would abruptly end the matter. He might whistle for the \$5,000. This would not suit him—Oh, foxy Silas Margrip!

But Mrs. Clyde had not yet stated the actual object of her visit. Her last speech was intended more to fathom the character of the man—to see if he was one who could likely be induced to enter into a scheme which she had formed.

He could not conceal from her steady, penetrating eyes that there was something obstructing his immediate declaration to promptly have remedied the mistake regarding the heiress.

And this was exactly what she had hoped for.

"Madam," said the crafty miser, "I would like to ask a question."

"You may do so."

"What special motive is under this? I mean—ahem!—why, after hiding yourself for so long, and when you knew Mr. Ardway was looking for your child to give her a magnificent inheritance, have you only lately made up your mind that the young lady now in possession must be ousted—ousted is the word, *pour cour cour*."

"I have not yet said I desired it."

"But you mean it."

"We will see whether I do or not. Please bring that Bible I see on your desk."

"Eh! The Bible!"

Considerably mystified, he brought the book.

"I have a dangerous revelation to make. Before doing so, I must have your promise on oath that you will never make use of or reveal anything in connection with this interview."

"But, madam, what in the world—"

"Will you oblige me?"

Overcome by curiosity Silas mumbled a very short but explicit oath of secrecy.

"Now, Mr. Margrip, I may say that I do not particularly seek the removal of the girl from her position as Girard Ardway's ward and heiress."

"The dogs you don't!"

He stood before her, book in hand, more mystified than ever.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TRIO OF OWLS.

"MADAM, I can't make out what all this means," Margrip said, bluntly.

"I told you I had a revelation to—"

"Yes. Let me hear it."

"You must bear in mind that you are under oath."

"Well aware of it. Go on!"

"By a strange coincidence, Mr. Royal Ardway loves my daughter, not knowing who she is in reality. He only became acquainted with her as Isabel Clyde the music-teacher."

"Oh!"

"They are engaged to be married."

"Ah!"

"But there has arisen an influence, a terrible and merciless influence to bear upon Isabel, tending to force her to give up her hopes of hap-

piness, relinquishing her troth to the young man entirely."

"Bless us! What a hodge-podge this is getting to be. Tell me about it."

"The one who calls herself Edna Crystol has declared that she possesses knowledge which will send Royal Ardway to prison, perhaps execution, for complicity in the violent death of his father."

"Is it possible?"

"Furthermore, she will use this knowledge unless Isabel absolutely gives up the idea of marrying with Royal."

"Oh, I see. She herself is in love with the young man."

"Well, we must, in turn, threaten that if she does as she declares—either bringing lifelong agony to my daughter or sacrificing Royal—we will drag her down summarily and cast her out from the wealth and its pleasures so recently acquired."

"But stop a moment, madam. Do you mean to say that if she will give up her ambition to win Royal Ardway, and let your daughter alone, she may remain unmolested and in full possession of the inheritance as Edna Crystol?"

"That is exactly my meaning."

"You are a singular woman."

"Why do you say so?"

"Allowing a vast fortune to slip away from your daughter—"

"I value my daughter's happiness of heart far more than moneyed wealth. Besides, if she becomes the wife of the man she loves, she will not be a beggar, and Royal's inheritance as her husband is preferable to the simple bounty—or charity, I might say—dispensed by Girard Ardway."

"And you want me to attack the *soi-disant* heiress in her citadel?"

"That is my desire."

Margrip gave his knee a rousing slap.

"Very well. I understand the whole thing. No need to say any more. It is now too late to call upon her—almost dark, you see; I will visit her in the morning. Oh! I'll work it all right for you, madam. Aha!"—rubbing his eely-fingered hands over and over—"it's a good nut. A sweet kernel in the nut for me. Good—yes. Your object shall be attained; depend upon that."

Mrs. Clyde arose and withdrew, saying that she would call in the afternoon of the next day to hear his report.

So elated was he by the game now playing itself into his hands, that he so much as forgot to ask Mrs. Clyde for her address.

It was ten o'clock P. M. when Silas Margrip went to bed—or rather, retired into the shape of a cramped worm upon the old, worn lounge in one corner.

His miserly brain was brimming with a golden prospect of compelling the heiress to hand out the \$5,000 which had, at least, been a plain bargain.

"I have her in a corner!" he muttered sanguinely. "Oh, yes, my dear young lady; you deem yourself safe; you defy Silas Margrip, now that you are an acknowledged heiress. Ha, ha! but it won't do. Ha, ha! it's of no use. *Perdita tua ex te!*" and with this upon his drowsy lips, he dropped off into sound slumber.

To have a rude and alarming awakening.

The hour was nearing midnight, when the lawyer was startled abruptly from his sleep by the grasp of no gentle hand.

Like a vise closed several gripes upon him. Shoulders and legs were pressed and held down immovably on the lounge, as if under the strength of a giant with many clutches.

One cry—one only—he was able to utter, with the first thrilling thought that he was about to be killed by an assassin in the dark. Then a gag was roughly thrust into his mouth.

Stout cords were wound tightly around his body and the lounge, until he was wrapped securely as a chrysalis in its womb.

After this operation, a match snapped and crackled. The grimy lamp on the desk was presently lighted.

And then the gaze of the gagged and helpless lawyer rested on a strange tableau.

There were three tall figures in the apartment, their shapes hidden by long gowns of black reaching from neck to heel, with black arm-sleeves terminating in black-gloved hands. The backs of their heads were perked in a somber, baggy stuff, and their faces—

Their faces were those of a booby-owl, immobile, staring, and the wide eyes having behind them other eyes, winking, flashing, very unlike the orbs of the bird they masqueraded.

Three human Owls they were, ominously grim.

"Well, Cap, reckon he's fixed solid," remarked a coarse voice behind a mask.

"Yes. Now take pattern by me," gruffly said another Owl; "and any plunder you may find you may keep. But do not forget what I am particularly after."

With this, the last speaking Owl began prying open the desk with an iron instrument.

The two companion Owls devoted themselves to Margrip's larder-closet and an old chest that

stood against the wall, rummaging with a promiscuous disorder.

The Owl at the desk presently uttered a low exclamation.

"Ah! I have it. Easy found."

A legal-looking document was tucked away beneath the gown.

"There's some money, Cap. That's ourn, ain't it?"

"Yes; take it."

There was a small roll of bills in the desk, and it was grabbed forthwith.

"You've got what you want, you say, Cap?"

"Yes. I expected we'd have to torture it out of him; but here it lay convenient at first search. Lucky for him, too; I'd have put a pair of pincers on each of his ears and pulled two ways, but what I'd have made him give up the paper I wanted."

"Haden't we better be clearin' out then?"

"Yes. How much money was in that pile?"

"Couple o' hundred."

"Then you are not so badly paid for this trouble."

"Oh, I ain't a-mournin'—are we Sa—"

"Hush!" came the imperative warning. "No names, you fool."

The chief Owl approached their prisoner, saying, harshly:

"We haven't any need to kill you, old law-slinger, though that little circumstance might have happened if we had not met with luck at the very first. As we've got what we came for particularly, we'll do you the favor to leave you so that you can get out of this fix."

The bonds were slightly loosened in a way that would enable Silas Margrip, at the cost of some difficulty and a few minutes of time, to release himself.

The next instant, the three Owls glided, rustling, out at the door.

Margrip thought he heard a dull rumbling of wheels in the distance.

The whole mysterious occurrence did not consume more than ten minutes, and ten minutes later the lawyer was freed of the ropes and gag.

He ran to the door and flung it wide, as if his impulse was to pursue the owl and bold depredators.

At the moment a young man was passing, going hurriedly.

"Hey—you!"

"Well, sir?"

"Have you seen anything of three men coming out of here?"

"No, sir, I have not."

"Step here a minute, please."

The pedestrian approached. The dim light from the lamp revealed the features of Trim Tasker.

"What is the matter, sir?" Trim asked, observing the other's trembling excitement.

"Matter! Look at this, will you!" Margrip exclaimed, waving a band around his disordered office. "I have been robbed, sir—robbed. It happened not ten minutes ago. Which way are you going?"

"Right down to the office."

"What office?"

"Picayune."

"Ha! Are you connected with that paper?"

"I am a reporter."

"You are the very man, then. Write this up. Let the citizens be warned. My name is Silas Margrip. Stop on your way and notify them at the station that the city is infested by a gang of owls—human owls, sir—robbers and cut-throats!"

He proceeded to give an exciting account of what had transpired.

Within a minute Trim had it all down, in brief, on his tablets.

Leaving Margrip examining, in fury and anxiety, to see to what extent he had been robbed, Trim started away on a half-run.

He had very little time left in which to straighten out and hand in his memoranda, besides notifying the police of the robbery, as he had promised the lawyer he would do.

It lacked but fifteen minutes to twelve o'clock, midnight—the hour of his engagement with the famous detective, "The Hound!"

CHAPTER XIX.

SNATCHED FROM THE GRAVE.

It was the morning hour of night.

Along the lone stretch, amid the uncertain gloom of the Metarie Road, a cab was proceeding briskly.

A short distance from the Half-Way House it had paused, and a singular operation was performed by its occupants.

Coarse blanket strips were wound and securely bound around and under the horses' iron-shod hoofs; similar wrappings were placed in heavy swathes around the wheel-tires.

When again the cab moved onward in the direction of the river, scarcely a creak of running-gear betrayed its presence in the semi-darkness; and the driver on his box looked like some being of the specter world speeding his team of phantom steeds before a somber chariot.

Once again there was a pause before a lot that had no fencing, but was inclosed by a line of scrubby, prickly hedge.

Two men alighted.

"Here we are. Move and speak cautiously."
 "A good place for a grave-yard, if ever there was one!" exclaimed the second, in a guarded voice, as if he felt the dreariness of the surroundings in his very marrow.

"Come on. We must work fast."
 By their voices only the two were recognizable as Harry Hound and Trim Taskar.

They drew forth several implements from the interior of the cab—two long-handled shovels, a hatchet and a small but powerfully-wrought gripper of claw-shape with a cross handle.

Carrying these they made their way through the hedging and stealthily across the lot, wherein was not a tree or bush to serve as a landmark in the uncertain starlight.

But the detective's course was unerring. Straight forward he led his companion to a newly-filled grave.

"We will dig here," he said.
 "And are we really going to exhume a dead nigger?" demurred the reporter, who had been partly enlightened, during the ride, as to what they were about to do.

"That remains to be seen, Trim."
 "Ugh! I don't like the business at all. It must be something of extraordinary import to call for this kind of thing."

"It is. Now to work."
 Harry took off his coat, and, grasping a spade, began to shovel out the dirt that was still loose above a recently deposited coffin.

"Suppose we're caught doing this?" suggested Trim, casting uneasy glances about in the murky distances.

"I hardly think that will be likely," assured the working detective. "This negro cemetery is a new one; the managers have not yet appointed their superintendent. Don't be alarmed."

The shovel, being plied vigorously, was sending the dirt out sure and fast in a neat pile at one side.

Owing to a peculiarity of the soil, the graves could not be made very deep. The ground was raised in extra high mounds over and broader than each grave, and The Hound had not excavated much deeper than his knees when he called for the gripper.

Trim heard a ripping and tearing of wood down in the narrow hole, and in the next minute the detective arose from a stooping posture, holding upward a cumbersome burden.

The reporter complied with a shudder, hastening to deposit the unpleasant armful on the sward, though not ungraciously.

Harry leaped out.
 "Strike a match—two or three of them in succession."

When the flickering light of the match shone down upon the form, Trim saw that the corpse was a young female.

The detective was kneeling. In one hand he held a bottle containing a colorless liquid, and wetting his fingers with some of this, he rubbed it in a persistent way upon the upturned cheek of the lifeless girl.

"Ha! it is just as I expected!"
 A white spot showed where the acid had touched. Another rubbing produced a similar result. There was white skin under the brown-black exterior.

"What does this mean, Harry?"
 "Oh, merely a little mystery that I am unraveling," was the light rejoinder.

"But this girl?"
 "Not a negro, as you see."

"Who in the world can she be?"
 "It is the girl that you saw at the voodoo house on Franklin street, last night."

"No!—you don't say so!"
 "Oh, yes, I do."

"I would give a great deal to know who she is and what the mystery means?"

"I will tell you, cheap—for nothing, if you can keep it shady."

"On my honor I will not breathe a word."
 "Then, this is Nell Deems, the missing shop-girl!"

"Great Andrew—"
 "Sh! Not so loud!"

"And what are you going to do with her dead body?"

"Nothing with her dead body. It is her living body that I want."

Trim had kept the matches burning and was bending forward with surprised interest. He could only stare at this remarkable speech.

"Trim, my dear fellow, I do not believe that this girl is dead. And—look here."

As the detective spoke he raised first the whole arm, then the wrist and fingers of the motionless figure and bent them easily—indeed they were very limp in his grasp.

"Rather limber, eh, for a corpse of twenty-four hours?"

"I should say so. Can it be that she has been intentionally buried alive?"

"Looks that way."
 "Who would have done such an awful thing?"

The reporter was horrified.
 "The man you pointed out to me in the basement of the St. Charles Hotel. I am after him. And that is why you must not start any sensation about Nell Deems. I don't want to frighten him away before I am ready to bag him. Now

help me to fill up. If the poor girl is alive, we are losing valuable time."

Trim's timidity had vanished. With a will he took one of the shovels and they soon had the grave restored to its former appearance.

"You bring along the tools, Trim," said Harry, as he started off, bearing the girl in his strong arms. And at the cab: "Now, Jerry, my man, back to the house I told you of. And mind: in case I haven't the opportunity later—for we may have to be dropped in a hurry, and you hasten right on—I want to specially caution you to be close-mouthed."

"Bet on me for that, sir."

At a swift and almost noiseless rate the cab sped along on its retracing route over the road. Pausing once to remove from the horses' hoofs and the wheel tires the deadening bandages, the conveyance passed through the slumbering city.

In due time, Jerry, the driver halted before the house where we have seen Royal Arday a voluntary prisoner while the detective so skillfully assumed the young man's character.

This halt was but for a few seconds. The intelligent cabman continued on as soon as his passengers reached the pavement.

With Trim Taskar following, the detective bore the girl up the steps.

At a peremptory rap, the door was opened by a woman whose features betrayed her to be a half-blood Indian.

Waving a lamp about her wiry-haired head, while giving the comers a rapid scrutiny, she admitted them and quickly closed the door.

Hound carried the girl up-stairs and deposited her on the bed in the one comfortable room before mentioned.

"There!" he sighed, turning away. "That much is accomplished."

"This is the girl?" said the Indian woman.

"Yes."
 "A white girl." She had been quick to detect the significance of the white marks on the cheeks.

"Do you think she is dead, Ducril?" the detective asked.

She stepped forward and examined the face, then ascertained the subtleness of the limb joints as had Harry.

"No, she lives."
 "Can you bring her around?"

"What Ducril does not know of herbs and potions never has been known," was the boastful and rather equivocal response. "See: I have brought these with me, to be ready."

She pointed to the table, where were ranged a score or more of curiously shaped vials and boxes.

"Let no time be lost then, Ducril. See what you can do."

"I must be alone."
 "All right. Come, Trim."

The two descended to the lower part of the building, Harry making use of his ever-ready bull's-eye lantern to light their way.

There was no furniture of any kind in the house, excepting in the bedroom, and they were compelled to stand or move restlessly about while awaiting some summoning signal from the Indian doctress.

The signal was a long while in coming.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE BULL'S EYE.

At last there was a guarded call from the head of the stairs.

"You may come."

They reascended to the bed-chamber. Harry advanced eagerly to the couch.

A beautiful white girl now lay there.

"Alive!" he briefly uttered, though so lowly as to be unheard.

Ducril stood to one side with her arms folded in a masculine manner.

"Whoever did this thing was not a botcher," she said.

"Speak on, Ducril."

"I could not call you sooner; there was much for me to do. The whole body was cunningly dyed."

"You have removed the stain?"

"Wholly, as clear as is the face. Her's is no common beauty."

"And she lives?"

"Let your own eyes be the judge."

The young girl, if it was Nell Deems, had truly been preserved from a horrible doom.

She lay there in all the naturalness of life, calmly, evenly breathing.

"She sleeps," spoke Ducril, warningly.

"Can we not awaken her—"

"No."

"Why not?"

"To arouse her at this time might prove fatal. The effort of awakening must be her own, and transpire in strictest quiet. In a few hours her eyes will open."

"I can scarcely curb my impatience to speak with her."

"Haste will ruin all. And more, I have this to tell you: at the moment her senses do return one of two things may happen."

"Two things?"

"Either she will be herself completely, or—"

"Or what?" demanded the detective, apprehensively.

"Or she will be a raving madwoman!"

"No!"

"Yes, I say. The drug absorbed by her veins to procure the outward semblance of death, is the very worst, the vilest of common stuff known to the children of Obi."

"Then may God guide the result!" fervently uttered Harry.

"Amen," added Trim, from the background.

To preserve the life, the reason, of one so young and beautiful was the first manly wish of the detective's heart.

Wholly unsolicited had been the interest we have seen him take in the case of Nell Deems, and this interest seemed to intensify in an enigmatical form as he stood over and gazed down upon the almost angelic face of the being he had so providentially snatched from the grave.

The Hound had never loved in his life—that is, with a lover's tenderly nameless ardor; he was half-thinking, at that moment, that he could give the best affection of his nature to this young victim of the plot he was trailing out.

Subordinate to these feelings was the fact that he believed he had, in Nell Deems, a witness to confound the arch-villain upon whose track he was hot and sure.

"It will be daylight, then, before she awakens?" he said, interrogatively.

"Yes."

"And before daylight"—musingly—"I have considerable to do. Come, Trim, I guess we'll be going. Ducril, guard and nurse this girl with every art you can master. Restore her in health and reason, and I will pay you a rich reward."

"All that is in my power, that will I do," replied the Indian woman.

The detective and the reporter left the house. On the pavement they separated.

The Hound consulted his watch—one with a phosphorescent dial, by which the owner could see the hour indicated as plainly in darkness as in light.

Exactly three o'clock A. M.

"I have very little over two hours in which to work," he muttered, striding along at a rapid gait. "But I think I know pretty much how to apply myself to the task, so not much time will be lost, once I am started."

His course was direct to the mansion on Prytania street.

Admitting himself with a latch-key, he paused a moment after passing the vestibule, as if to listen.

And as he stood in the dim light of the hall chandelier, with its lowered flame, we see—not Harry Hound, but, instead, the image of Royal Arday.

The remarkable transformation in his appearance had been effected as he walked onward in the deserted thoroughfares.

It is part of a detective's professional education to be able to make such perplexing changes at a moment's notice. Harry Hound was particularly noted in this ability; in less than ten seconds, at any time or place, he was fully prepared to so alter both looks and attire, that it is doubtful whether he would have been recognized by a party who even half expected it. His voice, too, had all the scope of a ventriloquist's, though without the trick of distance.

The household seemed to be in sound slumber. His entrance had been so noiseless as not to arouse any one.

Ascending to the next story, he went—not to the young man's room, but straightway, swift and feather-toed, to the chamber where the tragedy had occurred, and to which he carried the only key.

Entering here, he pushed the door to, but, by an oversight—or, perhaps, hardly deeming it necessary—he did not close it tightly. It did not seem probable that any one would disturb him in what he was about to do at that unseemly hour.

Every article remained just as it had been on the night when he was first summoned to hear of Girard Arday's mysterious disappearance.

The bull's-eye lantern was produced, and its rays flashed around him brightly.

He advanced to the mantle-piece and stooped down.

It was an ornamental affair, merely, the room being heated by register—the molding, hearth and interior being painted in an expensive design, and floored by a richly-wrought rug.

As he stooped the light shone upon something just within the line of opening on which his gaze bent studiously.

A clot of blood, smeared as if by some dragging contact of weight, and the course of the drag was toward the back of the fireplace.

This item had not escaped the keen eyes of The Hound upon his previous examination of the apartment.

According to Cracker Bill's statement, Girard Arday could not have been taken from the mansion on the night of his mysterious disappearance—at least not by the owl prowler who appeared to have been the moving genius in the tragedy; nor had the gentleman left it since, according to constant reportings which The Hound received from the man he had appointed to keep the house under careful surveillance.

It did not require any extraordinary capacity for reasoning to decide that Girard Ardway, dead or alive, must still be within the walls of the mansion; he must be concealed in some place totally unknown to the household; this place must be accessible from the bed-chamber, without necessity of one's passing out into the hallway; the blood-smear indicated that the body had been dragged into the fireplace. Within the fireplace, then, must lie the secret.

And this was verified when within ten minutes—and hardly able himself to explain precisely how it happened—Harry Hound was kneeling before an opening the size of one whole side of the fireplace.

Beyond the opening was a blackness and closeness of atmosphere that was of a shudderful feeling to the beholder's flesh.

The Hound experienced all the sensations of a man on the verge of a startling revelation.

At this juncture the bed chamber door, already slightly ajar, was pushed further open by some one beyond. The well-oiled hinges gave no sound to betray the presence of a spy.

Slowly the door moved in and back, and a face appeared there, looking in—a beautiful face, that was strangely pale, with black agate eyes, that even in the dim backward reflection from the lantern were dully sparkling with a mingled curiosity and self-apprehension.

The stealthy spy was Edna Crystol.

One glance she gave at the kneeling figure resembling Royal Ardway—one glance at the black aperture, showing that a secret was being laid bare—then she vanished.

Harry Hound, in silence, stooping lower to the narrow light of the mysterious hole, passed through to explore.

A few feet beyond he was able to stand erect, and the bull's eye, as he circled it around him, showed a compartment not four feet broad by ten long. The wall at one end and side was the studding, laths and plaster forming the wall of the bedroom; on the other two was the brick-work forming the corner at the front and side of the house.

At the further end was a small, square, open hole, without any cover, and the thick blackness below it seemed ready to mount or stream upward, as the envelope of some demon shape.

To note all this required but a second's glance.

The next instant Harry Hound recoiled. An exclamation impossible to suppress broke from his lips.

He had nerved himself for almost any strange disclosure. But the sight that greeted his eyes shook even the fibers of his injured frame, and nigh caused the lantern to fall from his grasp.

He had made, indeed, a terrible discovery.

Almost at his feet lay a human form, half undressed, drawn up in a painful heap, splattered with blood. Arms, legs, the whole body, in fact, were twined by the coils of a very long rope, with hard knots here and there, which rendered the person absolutely incapable of moving, and in the mouth was an ingenious gag with firm fastenings.

This object, this apparent corpse—the flesh still being tortured after the semblance of a heart-rending death—he saw was Girard Ardway!

CHAPTER XXI.

MARGRIP MAKES HIS TERMS.

AT A SEASONABLE hour in the sunny-bright morning a visitor rung the bell at the mansion on Prytania street.

Silas Margrip.

The lawyer's coat was buttoned tight; in his foxv face there was a look of "business."

He smarted under the utter refusal of Edna Crystol to pay him \$5,000 which was fairly promised; he writhed, mentally, under the discovery that the owlish marauders of the night gone had robbed him of a considerable sum of money that had been left all too carelessly in his desk.

Silas was in bad temper.

With the step of a dancing master in a hurry he brushed past the servant who opened the door, and in a tone decidedly imperative, said:

"I have called to see Miss Crystol. Is she—ahem!—is she in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell her I am here. Silas Margrip. Be in a hurry. Urgent—in presenti."

In the small reception-room at the rear of the hall he frisked and trotted to and fro impatiently.

The wheezy, wheedling accent of voice had vanished; his manner of speech was short, sharp, cuttingly pitched. His eely fingers rubbed over and over, and his face wore a grimace of sudden and extensive arrogance.

In short, the miser lawyer held a winning card, and he meant to play it with an unsparing hand.

The servant presently returned to say:

"Miss Crystol is too occupied to see you, sir."

"What—eh! But it won't do—oh, no! Not a bit. Go to her again and—"

"Miss Crystol told me to say, if that 'wouldn't do,' that she positively declined seeing you, and I was to show you the door."

Silas tip-toed across with the suddenness of a spider on its web, laying one hand on the man's shoulder.

"Ahem! well, you will return to her, nevertheless, and tell her that if she does not come down at once, I'll—yes—I'll have her out of this house in less than twenty-four hours. Understand me? That will bring her ladyship on a trot. I imagine. Away with you!" the last so quick and sharp that the lackey was somewhat startled.

At the instant the lawyer made this speech, the figure of Royal Ardway was descending the stairs. The words were loud enough for him to hear.

When the ascending servant, with the amazing message, had passed him, he slipped stealthily, by a convenient door, into a curtained alcove at the rear of and connecting with the apartment.

Edna very promptly acted upon the remarkable message.

She swept into the room with a quick, baughty step; her cheeks were burning and the black agate eyes were like smoldering embers.

"Are you the impudent person who dared to send such words to me by a servant?" she demanded, hotly.

"Now, my dear young lady," said Silas, with mocking suavity, "do not fly off in unbecoming tantrums. You will listen to what I have to say—"

"Such insolence is unbearable!"

"Ahem!"

"I shall call the servants to put you out of the house—"

"Take care that it is not yourself they put out," was the menacing interruption.

Edna was breathing hard. She was furious. But something held her back from an outburst of that wrath; something more than mere curiosity rendered it desirable that she should hear what was behind the bold threat.

"You are a crazy man."

"You think so?"

"It must be."

"Why?"

"Only a crazy man would dare to be so insolent to me in my own house."

"We shall see, my dear young lady."

"What do you want?"

"The \$5,000 you owe me."

"I owe you nothing."

"You agreed, before I brought you from your obscurity in St. Louis, to pay me the sum of \$5,000 as soon as you were positively established as the ward of Girard Ardway."

"You are a blackmailer, and a bungler at that."

Silas preserved his equanimity.

"You will find, my dear young lady, that I am a lawyer of good standing in New Orleans, and I know my business pretty thoroughly. I want my \$5,000."

"And I tell you, as I told you once before, I never made such a promise; I never was in St. Louis; I never saw you in my life until yesterday."

The listener in the alcove started at hearing this. If she never was in St. Louis, then she was, plainly, not the girl with whom Girard Ardway had negotiated to become his ward and heiress. But he thought, as did the lawyer, that this was merely a play at brow-beating, to escape a promised payment.

"You are determined to persist in this denial?"

"I am only denying a statement that is preposterous."

"My dear young lady, you are fooling yourself."

"I cannot tolerate this much longer—"

"Your game is coming to an end."

"What game, sir?"

"I will blow the whole thing unless you consent to two items I shall propose."

"Oh, you are a lawyer with a price?" sneeringly.

"First, my \$5,000," continued Silas, in a business demeanor unruffled by the sneer. "Money first, always, you know. Item No. 2: you must relinquish your idea of marrying Royal Ardway."

This was an astonisher for the beautiful girl. How could he know anything of her passion for Royal? She could not believe that Isabel would have dared reveal the circumstance, and above all, to a stranger.

"I do not at all understand your last insult, sir."

"But you will find out what it means if you refuse to trade."

"Trade?"

"Just lend me your ear, briefly, while I state the case. Now, when I found you in the city of St. Louis, you were, as you frankly stated, an orphan; you could not recollect your parents; you were earning a livelihood by painting pictures. Ahem! Your name, you persisted, was Louie Crystol—not Edna. I honestly believed that you were mistaken in regard to your own identity; I succeeded in persuading you that your real name was Edna, and a brilliant life, a fortune, awaited your acceptance. In return for my services in establishing you, it was stipulated that you should pay to me the sum of \$5,000. This is all familiar to you. Now you refuse to fulfill your part of the bargain—that's the long and short of it. It won't work, my

dear young lady. I have you squarely in a corner. It has been a mistake all along. The chances are you will have to vacate the lofty pedestal—tumble down. I must inform you that within the last twenty-four hours the real Edna Crystol has come to the front. I can produce her—yes—with proofs indubitable. Demmy! I will, too, if you keep on with your nonsense. Her mother, Martha Crystol, too, is alive, and can furnish a mountain of evidence in support of herself and child. You can not furnish any such evidence. Do you see, my dear young lady, exactly how this thing is—hey?"

He paused, his ratty eyes fixed upon her and his face in a snaky grin.

A fearful tumult was waging in the bosom of the beautiful girl. It was a heat of mingled anger, chagrin and dread. She felt herself defeated. Through her brain was flashing the exclamatory thought:

"Ah, I have made a misstep! Why did I not fathom this when first I met this man? Percy Desmond did not sufficiently inform me. I see that I must yield and buy up Margrip; he knows too much. Though I place no credence in this story about a real Edna Crystol being found, he is apt to be a dangerous enemy."

Silas watched her closely.

"What do you propose?" she asked, scarcely above a whisper, so intense, half-blinding was the fire within her.

"Ahem! Now you are talking sensible."

"Be brief, sir."

"I want my \$5,000."

"Well, you shall have it."

"I thought so. Sensible, very sensible at last, my dear young lady."

"Anything else?"

"Oh, yes."

"What is it? I desire to end this interview."

"I remarked that you must give up hopes of marrying Royal Ardway."

"How do you know I have any such hopes?"

"No matter—I know it."

"Even admitting such a thing, what is your objection?"

"My dear young lady—excuse me."

"Tell me, and I will pay for that also."

Margrip's eyes glistened. More money for his miser hearings.

"Well, by a strange coincidence, it seems that Royal Ardway is, at this moment, himself in love with the rightful heiress, Edna Crystol."

"Impossible. I know that he has plighted his troth to a young lady named Clyde."

Sly Silas only bowed.

"I consent to your terms," Edna said, a bruptly. "If I do as you require, I understand that I am not to be interfered with?"

"That is the ticket, exact. *In extenso.*"

"Give me your address. In a few hours I will send a check."

Margrip, with a bow, presented one of his professional cards.

As the card passed he was looking straight and triumphantly into the black-agate eyes. Something he saw there caused him an imperceptible start.

He had made a discovery.

On the street, a few minutes later, he exclaimed:

"Jupiter! what can it mean? Maybe this girl is right when she avers that she never made any bargain with me in St. Louis. The girl in St. Louis had brown eyes, or I'm dreadfully mistaken; this one has orbs of jet. Can it be this is not the girl I found for Ardway? If so, then who the dogs is she?—where did she come from?—how did she get there? Ahem! no matter. My \$5,000 is all right. That's settled, *communi consensu.*"

Edna remained standing in the center of the room when the lawyer had departed. The beautiful head drooped slowly.

The listener in the alcove maintained his eavesdropping position.

Within the minute there was a tinkle at the door-bell.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CLEAR "GIVE AWAY."

THE new comer was Percy Desmond, The Prince.

Edna, hearing his voice of inquiry in the hallway, advanced from the apartment, showing herself and saying:

"Yes, I am at home, Mr. Courtley. Will you walk into this room?"

"Good-morning, Miss Crystol," saluted the handsome adventurer, bowing gracefully, and moving toward her.

The moment he had entered the room at her invitation, Edna closed the door, her hands, behind her, remaining on the door knob, as if she would hold him a prisoner.

"I have something for you," he said, suppressedly.

"What?"

"Behold for yourself."

With a slight flourish he extended a legal-shaped document.

On its back she read the indorsement:

"LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF GIRARD ARDWAY!"

It was a most valuable present at that time.

"Ah! I am glad you secured this. How—"

"No matter how, *ma belle*. There is the will. You are safe."

"Neither of us is as safe as you suppose."

"No?"

"Percy Desmond, you are a bold man."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"But you are a careless plotter."

"Why do you say that?"

"Since this affair several tripping items have arisen which have nearly ruined all."

"But they are now happily surmounted," he half laughed.

"You are mistaken—not entirely surmounted."

"Why, you have the will, which makes you an heiress."

"Yes. I do not mean that."

"And I can assure you that the real Edna Crystol is now dead and buried."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"I can tell you something very singular, then."

"Do so, if you can."

"Did you see a man going out of this house as you came in?"

"Yes—old Margrip, the lawyer."

"He says he has found the real Edna Crystol; that he has discovered me to be the wrong girl. She and her mother are both alive and have a mass of indisputable evidence as to their identity."

"This is sheer nonsense. It is a wily fabrication. I tell you Edna Crystol is dead and buried. I know the exact spot where her grave is."

"Why did you not advise me in minute detail in regard to the finding of the girl?"

"Oh, it was hardly necessary to go into particulars."

"And there is where you were extremely careless, as I charge. This man Margrip, it seems, had privately bargained with the girl for her to pay him \$5,000. He called upon me for it. I, thinking he was but a tricky fellow, trying to squeeze money out of connection with the Crystol matter, flatly denied all knowledge of him or his claim. When he spoke so sanguinely of producing the true heiress by the will, I naturally became frightened and—well, I bought him."

"Thereby admitting that you felt yourself to be an impostor!"

"What else could I do? It is your fault. You should have taken the pains to prepare me for such an emergency."

"The whole thing is a trick, as you at first suspected. He has no such parties to produce. It was a play upon your fears to get his money. He is apt to prove a dangerous appendage, however. Be at ease. He shall be removed."

The gleam in his eyes revealed what was meant by the word—"removed"—and Edna could not repress a shudder as she saw it.

"Now, *ma belle*, just consider Margrip, the other heiress, everything, attended to. Let us stop talking of trouble. I have called to discuss other prospects. Clarice Ardway is now en route for New Orleans; she will soon arrive. I have had, as I mentioned before now, a previous acquaintance with her. It is my intention to marry her—fairly if I can, forcibly if I must. I look to you to exert an influence, by every art that you are capable of, in my behalf."

"Why not spare this pure girl?"

"Heh? Why, your tone sounds almost jealous."

"Jealous of a villain like you loving another, Percy Desmond! No. When I was divorced from you, two years ago, it was because I had grown to hate you—distinctly hate you. But a strange fate of circumstances, somehow, has seemed to keep us in one another's track in pursuit of the same goal—money. In this last bold effort we have become partners, as it were; beyond that, the only thoughts I have of you are those of despicement."

"Thank you"—coolly. "And how much better are you, Miss Lucy?"

"Oh, I am bad enough. The taunt is an old one. But let me warn you, Percy Desmond, you had best listen to me, and discuss business. Leave to the future your plans for entrapping the hand and wealth of Clarice Ardway."

"What have you to say, specially?"

"Something which, I think, will startle you."

"Indeed?"

"The detective is closer on our trail than you dream of."

"What detective?"

"The Hound, as you call him."

"What about him?"

"He is dangerously near."

"How near, that you know of?"

"In this very house, disguised as Royal Ardway. So skillfully has he played the part, that yesterday I even had my arms around his neck and did not penetrate the deceitful resemblance."

This was startling news to Desmond.

"It is just the thing that The Hound would be apt to do," he murmured, intense and thoughtful. "Hardly another man would risk it, when some of the servants, I happen to know have been with the family since Royal was a boy. A bold adept only could deceive them. You are right. The trail is hot."

"I have not told all, by any means," continued the girl.

"Well, do you think he has made any discoveries?"

"He has, assuredly."

"What like?"

"The secret passage."

"What!—no!"

"Oh, yes; he knows all about it."

Desmond had taken a step toward her, then paused as if transfixed. His hands clinched spasmodically.

"I saw him last night—or, rather, just before daybreak this morning, in Girard Ardway's room," pursued Edna. "He was on his knees before the fire-place, in it, I may say; the fire-place was telling its own tale. I myself have marveled until now, as to how the mystery was managed."

"What did he find there, in the secret passage?"

"I am unable to say. I dared not spy further for fear of betraying my proximity."

A wolfish scowl settled in the adventurer's face.

"There is but one course to pursue," he cried huskily.

"What is that?"

"The Hound must die!"

Once again Edna shivered.

"You are always ready for blood."

"A few drops of it have never yet deterred me from an object."

"Oh, but I am heartily sick of it—"

"No weakening now," he hissed. "A false step and we may go to the gallows; a steady nerve and we will yet laugh at this danger. I must to work. For the present, good-by. Keep your wits about you. We will soon be rid of The Hound."

With this remark, telling of murder in his heart, Desmond took his departure.

It had not occurred to either of the pair that there might have been an eavesdropper behind those thick, rich curtains at the alcove.

When Edna had disappeared, the seeming figure of Royal Ardway stepped forward into the room just vacated.

Harry Hound had heard every word.

"It is a wide-open game now, catch-as-catch-can," he half chuckled. "So, Margrip is to have his throat cut, no doubt; I am to be knocked in the head, possibly. But, as I am cast for a principal character, I think I prefer some alteration in the programme."

He left the house. On his mouth was set a deep, meaning smile, and the keen eyes, the long-trained senses, were now alert for any dastardly attempt upon his life which, he reasoned, the adventurer was daring enough to commit at any hour.

He went to the house on Baronne street, where Royal was imprisoning himself, purchasing on the way a bottle of wine and several articles of food that would not require cooking.

"I have brought you a generous luncheon, Mr. Ardway," he said, on entering. "It signifies that you are to remain here until I come again to give you your liberty."

"It is outlandishly tiresome."

"To show yourself now would spoil everything. I am going to close in on my game pretty soon."

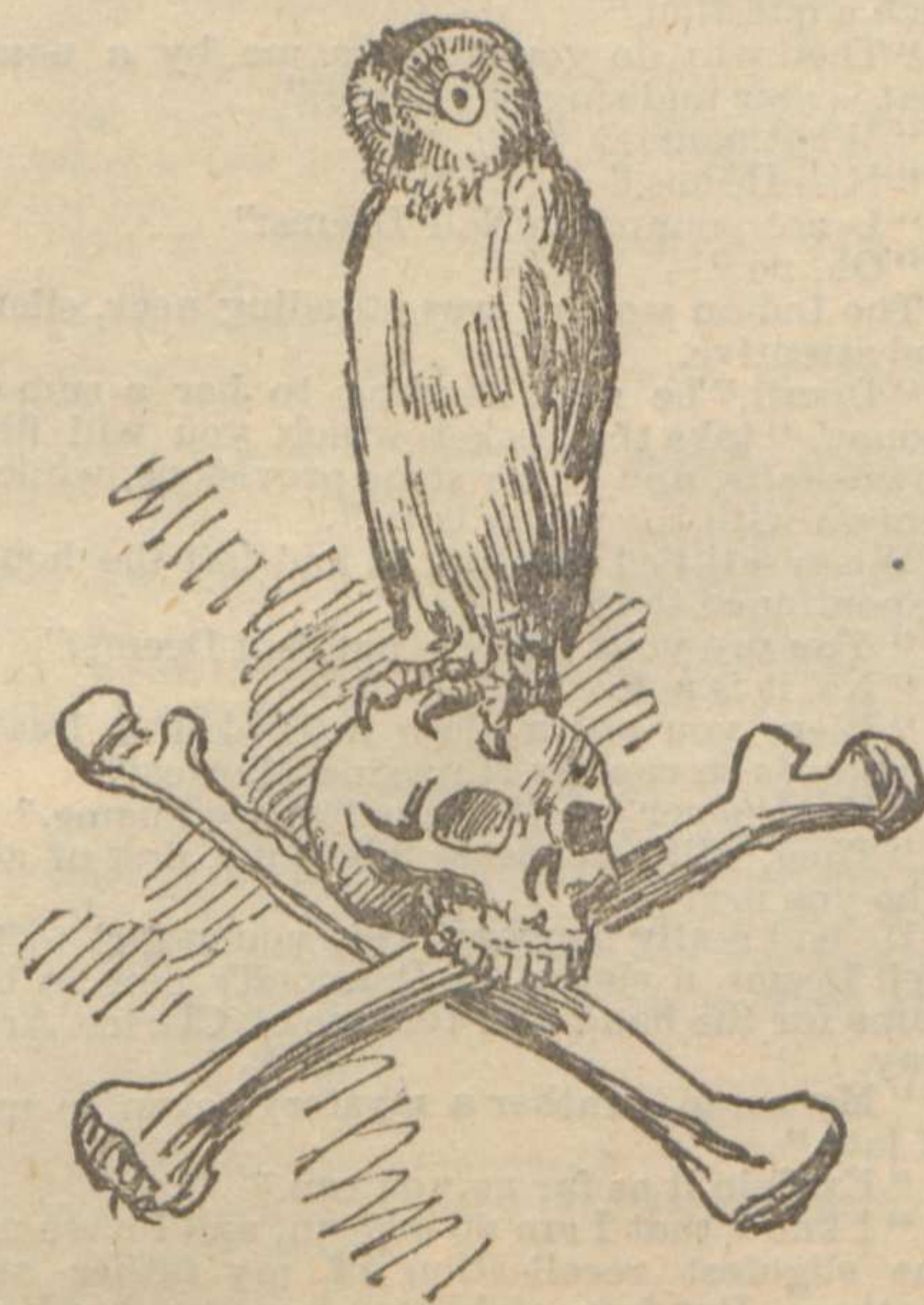
"Then you are progressing favorably?"

"I may tell you yes. But ask no questions yet."

From there he went to the Agency. He was now in his own proper person.

Immediately upon presenting himself, the clerk handed him an unstamped letter, bearing the address of Harry Hound.

Breaking open the missive, he saw this:



"Harry Hound, you are doomed! The threat of the Owls of New Orleans will be fulfilled!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TIMELY WARNING.

HARRY HOUND smiled calmly as he surveyed the ominous note. In his bold, shrewd eyes there was a glimmer of inward satisfaction.

Never, in all his experience as a detective, had a game of villainy played itself so directly into his hands like this.

He had ample knowledge that there was such a mystic and undoubtedly criminal order as the Owls existing in New Orleans; the latest heard from them through local gossip in the *Picayune*, relative to the robbery at Margrip's office, was an exploit displayful of determination and daring.

This second threat upon his life, coming so immediate upon his lucky appraisal of a plot to kill him, which he had overheard in the parlor of the Ardway mansion, was to him a conclusive indicator of the paramount genius in the menacing crew.

Desmond was his man.

And right here he resolved that, in conjunction with the approaching discomfiture and punishment of the Arch-Owl, Desmond, he would either exterminate or scatter the rest of the Owls beyond all probability of their reorganization.

But be it remembered that, although Harry was now in possession of sufficient evidence to satisfy him of the deep, dark scheme being promulgated by the adventurer, he had, as yet, no positive proofs, no strong witness to convict that person of an actual and desperate crime. The beautiful, the false Edna Crystol, could be relied on to—perjure herself and maintain her story as ascertained from Margrip.

And who could she be?—this lovely being with a fiery soul. By what strange stroke of luck had Desmond found an assistant in his venturesome game to secure the Ardway wealth?—one so wondrously like her whose picture the detective still carried in his pocket. Not Nell Deems, he argued, for that stumbling-block to Desmond's aspirations for the hand of Clarice Ardway had been buried alive.

In all, a very tangled case.

"I must see old Margrip," he decided. "Perhaps there was something more than bunkum in his threat to produce the rightful heiress. Besides—poor old miser!—there is no reason why I should permit him to be assassinated, when a word may save him. I must look out for myself, too. With a cool, calculating, cold-blooded leader like Desmond seems to be, there is no foreseeing in what minute the Owls will strike."

Then he sought the lawyer's office.

On the door was hung a battered slate, bearing the legend:

"Gone to bank. Return shortly."

This doubtless meant that the promised check had promptly arrived.

Margrip soon appeared, and was accosted by the detective.

"Good-morning, sir. Mr. Margrip, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Yours truly—yours to command. Walk in. Have a seat, sir. How can I be of service to you?"

"My name is Hound," exhibiting the badge under his vest-lapel.

"Oh!" exclaimed Silas, wondering what an officer could want.

"I have called to ask a few professional questions."

"Certainly—of course. Happy to oblige you. *Ich dien*—as the Germans say. I see; it is about the robbery last night—"

"Not at all."

"No? What then?"

Silas was just then richer by \$5,000. He was in good spirits.

"First, where is this young girl whom you know to be the true beneficiary under Girard Ardway's will?"

"Heh! what's that?" pricking his ears surprisedly.

"You heard me, I guess."

"I don't understand."

"Where is Edna Crystol?"

"Why, bless me! in her home on Prytania street where she belongs, I suppose."

"I do not allude to that one, but the other one."

"The other one? Why, sir—"

"Come, Mr. Margrip, we both know that the young lady now at Mr. Ardway's residence is not really Edna Crystol."

The lawyer was puzzled. He grew perceptibly nervous.

"Why do you assert that, sir?"

"For the very simple reason that I overheard your entire conversation with the supposed Miss Crystol, this morning—"

"The dogs you did!"

"Yes. And let me here remind you that you have placed yourself in the position of an accessory to a fraud. Knowing the girl to be falsely in possession, you have accepted a bribe to keep that knowledge quiet, while the true heiress is in existence elsewhere. Rather a bad showing for you."

Silas hunched forward in his chair. There was no use in trying to beat about; the detective was posted. He came out openly.

"You are wrong in one thing, sir," he said, with snappy quickness.

"Am I?"

"You are."

"I would like to know how."

"I am not a party to a fraud against the true Edna Crystol."

"Explain, then."

"My proposition to the girl who calls herself Edna Crystol—and who, until very recently, I honestly considered to be that person—was made at the actual request of the true Edna Crystol's mother."

"You astonish me!"

"Fact, sir."

"The true Edna's mother is willing for this remarkable thing?"

"Willing and anxious."

"What can she be thinking about? It is unheard of."

"She has a peculiar reason."

"I should suppose it was peculiar. What is it?"

"Listen and I will inform you."

Margrip gave his chair another hitch. He proceeded to give the detective a full account of Mrs. Clyde's visit to his office. The fact that he was under an oath not to do this very thing having utterly escaped his memory.

And therein was surprising information for the listener. It was a remarkable fate that Royal's betrothed, Isabel Clyde, should appear to be the very young girl for whom Girard Ardway was looking.

"I shall see Mrs. Clyde and her daughter," Hound said, arising.

"Ah! but there is a difficulty," Silas rejoined, rubbing his nose.

"Difficulty—how?"

"I forgot to ask Mrs. Clyde where she lived."

"Oh, I know her address."

"You do. Are you going there now?"

"During the day, some time."

"Please tell her, for me, that everything is all right. The young lady who had meant to be her daughter's formidable rival has consented to withdraw from—ahem!—from the love tournament."

Harry had doubts about the reliability of this message, with no other influence than the lawyer's recent arrangement to back it. His experience told him that girls of the false Edna's bold and passionate nature were not prone to so easily relinquish an ambition of love once conceived.

"Before leaving you, Mr. Margrip, I have a warning and a small piece of advice to give you."

"What can it be?"

"Your life is in danger."

"Heh! What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. Take my advice and get out of New Orleans—to day if you can. There are those who have doomed you to assassination—I know it."

"You know it!" frightenedly.

"Yes."

"Arrest them! Jail them!"

"Oh, no; not yet, if you please. The truth is, Mr. Margrip, there is quite a tremendous plot going on, involving itself with Mr. Ardway's death. I am after the big frog in the puddle. This individual has an incentive to blow your brains out, or cut your throat. Leave New Orleans until I have bagged him; advise me of your whereabouts, and I will let you know when it is safe to return. Address, Harry Hound, Detective Agency, St. Charles street near Canal."

"Blow my brains out! Cut my throat!"—spluttered the astonished lawyer.

"Good day," broke in Harry, briefly, and passing out at the door.

Margrip was fully aroused to an apprehension for his bodily safety.

He lost no time in leaving the city—leaving, too, several criminal cases docketed for early trial at court, with only a hasty letter of instruction to a brother lawyer.

This expeditious action doubtless saved his life.

For at the midnight hour of that night there was a startling tableau in the dingy office.

Within the apartment suddenly came the faint sound of cat-like treading feet and a soft rustle of garments, as of one or more persons feeling searchingly about in the darkness.

Then a match crackled; a light gleamed, revealing two spectral forms with owl faces, domino gowns and hands gloved in sable thread.

There would have been three, as on a previous occasion, but for a strange incident to be shown in a future chapter.

In each gloved hand was grasped the terrible bowie-knife half raised to deal a murderous blow.

But a simultaneous oath broke from each owl mask as they saw that the room was empty.

The lawyer was not asleep in his accustomed place; instead, on the head of the lounge was pinned a letter-sheet, on which was written in large, sprawly letters, as if with a pen-butt, the announcement:

"Gone to escape assassination! Somebody is fooled! *Quod vide!*"

CHAPTER XXIV.

CUPID AND THE PROFESSION.

HARRY HOUND was very anxious to visit the young girl whom he had so providentially rescued from the grave at the negro cemetery.

It was now high noon, and he deemed it a suitable hour for presenting himself.

There was so much at stake upon Ducril's medical skill, that he felt some uneasiness as to what awaited him.

His course was from the lawyer's office thither.

When he reached the house the Indian woman admitted him with a promptness that showed she had been watching for him.

The quick, searching glance he bestowed upon the dusky face, discovered as much as words could have told, and a long breath of relief escaped him.

"How is she, Ducril?"

"The danger is past."

"She has recovered?"

"Yes."

"In sound mind?"

"The brain is clear. But have a care how you approach her, for her nerves will not bear excitement."

"Oh, I'll be as cool as a summer zephyr."

Elated, and treading softly, he ascended to the room where Ducril's charge, partly prepared for this visit, awaited him.

The girl was seated in a large, comfortable chair near a window that afforded a cheerful prospect over the busy city.

She greeted him with a smile, weakly raising and extending a hand.

"Ah!" she wavered; "you are the kind friend my nurse has been speaking about."

"Yes, miss," rejoined Harry, gently, and placing a chair for himself near her. "I wish to prove my friendship for you all I can."

"I know you have been doing something very, very noble for me; exactly what, is a blank to me, except that I am freed from my enemies. What has happened?"

"That is just what I wish to ask you, Miss Deems."

"I have had an awful experience."

"So I imagine."

"You are surely my friend?" with a slight lingering startled look in her eyes.

"Miss Deems, my name is Harry Hound. I am a city detective"—displaying his small, bright badge of office. "I assure you I am your friend. I know you have been, by some foul means, in very cruel hands. But you are now entirely safe—safe as my right arm and the law can make you. Banish every fear. Be open; confide in me. I must know all that has befallen you, that I may be able to bring your enemies to an account."

"You are very kind. Your voice has a true sound. I feel safe with you."

Almost unknowingly to herself, in her deep emotion of gratefulness, she laid one hand upon his arm, as a child will cling to a strong protector.

The action sent a thrill through his frame.

"But I am quite puzzled at one thing," she said.

"What is that?"

"Tell me; is this a private madhouse?"

"A madhouse!" he exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Indeed I am not mad, though I have passed through enough to have robbed me of all reason—"

"A madhouse!" he broke in. "My dear girl, what can you be thinking about? Nothing of the sort. I might almost say you were crazy to ask such a question."

"Then why do you address me by a name that is new and singular to me?"

"What name?"

"Miss Deems."

"Is not your name Nell Deems?"

"Oh, no."

The Indian woman was standing near, silent and attentive.

"Ducril," he said, handing to her a sum of money, "take the basket which you will find down-stairs, and go for some provisions, while I remain with the young lady."

When satisfied that Ducril had left the house he continued to the girl:

"You say your name is not Nell Deems?"

"No, it is not."

"Were you not a clerk in Haskel & Deal's dry goods store near Magazine Market?"

"No, I never heard of the firm you name."

"Then, will you please tell to me, first of all, who you are?"

He had really supposed this young girl to be Nell Deems, a victim to Desmond's plot in his game for the hand and fortune of Clarice Ardway.

"My name is rather a mystery, even to me, of late."

"Explain it as far as you can."

"I know that I am an orphan, and I have not the slightest recollection of my father and mother. But from childhood my name has been pretty distinctly fixed in my memory."

"What name?"

"Crystol."

"Crystol!" he repeated, in surprise.

"Yes; I have grown up believing my name to be Louie Crystol—I say believing, for recently, it seems, there are those who assert that I am wrong, that my name is Edna—not Louie."

The detective was struck by a sudden revelation.

He drew forth the electrograph portrait.

"Did you ever see this before?" he questioned.

"Why, I painted that myself!" she exclaimed.

"You did?"

"Yes, there are marks by which I know it."

The original of the picture was facing him—brown eyes and all.

Here was the girl whom Girard Ardway had expected to adopt as his ward.

The plot for millions of money lay bare to his keen perception—everything was plain. But he said:

"Tell me your story."

"It is a short one. I lived in St. Louis. I was making my living by picture-painting. One day there came to me a lawyer, who said he had been searching for a long while and at great expense to find me. He persisted that my name was Edna Crystol—not Louie—and argued so strongly, so plausibly, supplying links for my remembrance of the past, that at last I half believed he must be right. It was pleasant news for a girl in my humble condition of struggling life-work, to hear that some one in this cold world desired to lift me up to wealth and a loving home. I gladly consented to go to the gentleman who wished to adopt me as his ward—"

"His name was Ardway?"

"Yes."

"Proceed, please."

"I was to have started for New Orleans on a certain day. But before the day set I received a telegram instructing me to come by the very next packet. I obeyed. When I landed at the levee, I was met by a rather handsome man, who said he had been deputed by Mr. Ardway to meet and conduct me to the St. Charles Hotel. Instead of going to the hotel we were driven, in a cab, to a horrid locality. The man said we were first to see Mr. Margrip—the lawyer who was managing the business concerning me, and that his office was here. I was persuaded to alight and enter a house. Then—"

She paused, covering her face with her hands, as if the remembrance of what followed was too much for utterance.

"Go on, miss."

"I was seized by the man and by a great, ugly negro woman who admitted us to the house. My cries for help were stifled; something—some disagreeable substance—was forced down my throat; I became unconscious. After this—how shall I ever describe it?—I experienced the most singular sensations it is possible to conceive of. I knew that I was alive, but beyond this fact, no more that was definite. I could hear human voices, knew that others were around me continually. I could see, but what I saw was very queer—nothing human in anything, as it were; all fantastic, all shapeless—nothing that I could fix comprehensively in my mind longer than the instant. I knew that days were passing; there came to me intervals of rest, then wakefulness. Suddenly all ended."

The Hound forebore shocking her by telling her that she had been buried alive.

"Do you know the name of the man who met you at the levee?"

"He gave me his card."

"What was on the card?"

"Percy Desmond."

"Ah! I thought so. Now, can you remember the name of the company by which you received the telegram summoning you to depart immediately for New Orleans?"

"Yes, distinctly," and she mentioned the head-lines on the telegraph company's note blank.

"One more question. Can you describe the driver of the cab which carried you and your enemy away from the levee?"

"Yes."

This information she also could give.

The detective ventured to take one of the weak, dainty hands in his own strong palms.

"You have passed through a terrible ordeal," he said. "But it is over. You will soon be well again. If it will afford you any satisfaction, I can tell you that the villain who sought the sacrifice of your young and innocent life will soon pay penalty for that and other crimes. Rest, nurse yourself; try and be contented with this little room for a while. Remember that I am watching over you. There is no danger now."

His voice was very tender. The girl's brown eyes met his in a full trustfulness, and there was a faint, peaceful smile in her pale, beautiful face.

"I feel even happy," she answered him, lowly. "I know I am safe with you. Be with me as much as you can, won't you?"

"Yes, I will."

The heart of the famous detective was pulsing with a strange, delightful warmth.

CHAPTER XXV.

TAKING AN ALARM.

WHEN Harry Hound bade Louie Crystol good-by for a short while, his feelings were of strangely mixed satisfaction and pleasure.

He had gotten at the very germ of Desmond's schemes.

He had fancied that there was something in the young girl's eyes expressive of encouragement for the love that had become a fixed fact within him.

For a brief spell he yielded to all the varied and chasing thoughts born of a resolution to win her for his wife if he could.

Habit of long professional training, however, soon brought the business importance of the occasion uppermost in mind. In a few minutes after departing from the girl's presence, he was again stern Harry Hound on the track of his game.

"This Desmond is a bold one of the whole cloth," he muttered; "bolder even than I gave him credit for. And yet, as his lovely accomplice charged him, somewhat careless. But then, the very oldest of criminals are sometimes the most loose in their way. He must have felt sure, indeed, of Louie Crystol's death. To have so readily given her one of his proper names when trapping her at the levee. And so the beautiful impostor is Nell Deems, the missing shop-girl. Nell Deems is really Lucy Crystol, the other daughter of Maynard Crystol, and supposed to be dead years ago. I recall now that I heard Desmond call her 'Miss Lucy' during their conversation in the parlor. Desmond and his Lucy were at one time married, too; are now divorced, and merely partners in guilt. Can Lucy Crystol be aware that this plot has nearly involved the murder of her twin sister? Would she care if she did know? Hello, there, Trim!"

Trim Tasker, the reporter, happened just then to be passing a corner ahead of the detective.

"Hello, Mr. Hound."

"Stop a minute, Trim; I want to speak with you."

"Don't be long about it, please."

"You are in a hurry?"

"Yes. Expect to be sent out to report a society wedding."

"How long have you lived in New Orleans?"

"Well, ever since I was born."

"And I have only been on the force here a few years. I don't know everything. Can you tell me anything about the house No. — Prytania street?"

"What like?"

"Was it always a private residence?"

"Oh, no."

"What, then?"

"I remember that quite a number of years ago—before the war, in fact—it was a fashionable club-house. The members of the club belonged to the tip top crust of society."

"A club-house, eh?"

"Yes. The upper back building—if my memory is not astray—was a private portion of parlors for gambling purposes; only for members. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Just it. Thanks. Don't let me detain you."

The detective had several important matters to attend to. Leaving Trim to hasten on his way to the Picayune building, The Hound sought the office of the — Telegraph Company.

There chanced to be but a single clerk in charge, the rest having gone to dinner.

"I would like to look at your files for the past week," he said, briefly, to the clerk.

"Can't permit it, sir."

"Why not?"

"Against the rules."

"But let me explain. I sent a telegram from this office to St. Louis a few days ago. The party receiving it took action just the reverse of what I instructed. He has since arrived in New Orleans, and flatly disputes the wording of my communication. There has been an error."

"We never make mistakes," was the curt interruption. "All of our messages are 'repeated.'"

"Then I may have made the mistake myself; and as several thousands of dollars are at stake, I would just like to see if I was such an idiot."

The Hound had a purpose in not at once revealing his identity as an officer. The ruse was successful. He was shown the files.

"Ah, here it is!" he presently exclaimed, pausing in his examination when he came upon the duplicate of the telegram which had brought Louie Crystol to the villain's murderous net.

"You did not send that, sir."

"I didn't?" in feigned surprise.

"No, sir."

"But, of course I did."

"Of course you did not."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because I particularly remember taking and sending off the message myself. It was given at that window by a man who did not resemble you at all."

"You are positive of this?"

"Yes, sir, positive."

"Can you describe the man?"

"Yes, I can even do that."

"Then you will greatly oblige me by doing so."

As he said this, he quietly displayed the talismanic badge.

The clerk smiled as he realized the trick, and described the party fully.

The sender of the message was Percy Desmond.

The detective was working his points on Desmond down as fine as possible.

From the telegraph office he went in a cab to the cottage of the Clydes.

A long conversation ensued between the detective and the two ladies in the cosy little parlor.

During this interview Isabel learned, for the first time in her life, who she really was; for Martha Clyde had never confided to her daughter anything of their family.

When The Hound left the cottage he wore his admirable disguise as Royal Arday.

He returned to the mansion on Prytania street.

Passing along the hallway, he encountered the French maid, who was about to ascend by the rear stairs. She was carrying a silver tray, and on the tray was a glass containing a hot drink that smelled of brandy.

"What have you there, Josette?"

"A drink for mademoiselle."

"Of what kind?"

"Ah! monsieur, my mistress have the nervous attack from something. She will take the ardent spirit to make medicine."

"Smells like pretty strong toddy," he remarked.

"I know not. I have make of this and of that so much and so much, like the careful instruction. I nevair taste of the stuff—what you call—toddie."

"She is nervous, eh?"

"Oui, monsieur."

"Well, run along, or the liquor will get cold. Say that I am sorry she is unwell."

Something had transpired to occasion this special and sudden nervous illness in Edna Crystol.

During the absence of the man who she knew must be the detective in a most skillful disguise, she yielded to a mastering curiosity as to what had been discovered in the bedroom of Girard Arday.

Sending Josette out upon some trifling errand, and assuring herself that none of the servants were in the upper stories, she stole forth cautiously toward the apartment.

Not without some guilty timidity, her hand turned the door-knob.

Stooping and looking through the key-hole, she made a singular discovery.

The door was locked; the key was in the lock upon the inside!

As she straightened up again, she heard a dull-smothered, thumping sound, as of some one driving nails through a plank.

Within the bedroom all was still as death.

A vague alarm came over her.

She quickly returned to her own apartments, and when Josette came back from the errand sent the maid to prepare a hot and strong toddy.

Her frame seemed to have become chilled; her hands were shaky.

This oppressive feeling she endeavored to fight off. But the foreboding of a danger was settling on her mind like a grim grasp.

When Josette brought the steamy liquor, she asked:

"Did you make the inquiry?"

"Oui, mademoiselle."

"Well?"

"Nobody have hammer at all anything in the house to-day."

"You interrogated all the servants—all, Josette?"

"Every one, mademoiselle."

"Did any one see you bringing this to me?" pointing to the salver, while she raised the glass to her lips.

"Only Monsieur Royal—that is all. He come in as I pass up."

"Did he have anything to say?"

"He was so sorry you complain of the illness."

"Did you see which way he went?—what he did on entering the house?"

Josette had, without any particular reason, save her natural inclination to spy, watched over her shoulder at the supposed Royal Arday, when they met and passed a second time on the upper floor.

CHAPTER XXVI.

INVITING A DEADLY PERIL.

"Oui, mademoiselle," answered Josette to the question from her mistress. "The poor young man who have grieve so, he go to his father's room. Ah, ciel! the horrid room of blood and so much mystery."

"Did he enter?"

"Yes."

"You surely saw him enter?"

"Oh, surely—yes. But the door make him some trouble, I think."

"In what way?"

"He must turn the handle—so—and so—two, three four times; it make the sound: tick-tick—click, click!"

Edna started to her feet and began walking rapidly to and fro.

The potent draught she had swallowed seemed to have produced the desired effect. Her tapering fingers, rich with jewels, clinched and opened alternately until the gems flashed fiercely. Above the cold, black-agate orbs there was a frown that grossly marred the beautiful face.

"A signal!" she murmured, intensely and inaudibly. "A signal by which he gains admittance to Girard Arday's room. The pounding I heard may have been beyond the fire-place; some one, perhaps, nailing up the outside entrance to the secret passage. The detective has somebody hidden in that room. Great Heaven! what if it be Girard Arday himself, not dead, after all! Is this detective playing, like a cat with a mouse, to tear with claws at last?"

Suddenly wheeling upon Josette:

"Have you not some relatives living in the city?"

"Oui, mademoiselle."

"Would you like to have a little holiday?"

"Yes, indeed, if I could be spared."

"Go and visit your relatives, Josette. And here—here is something to make merry with. Go now, Josette."

Josette was profuse in thanking her liberal mistress for the crisp note fairly thrust upon her.

Edna was in a hurry to be rid of the maid.

When alone, the beauty began a very mysterious series of actions.

Into a small sachel she hastily threw and crammed a quantity of jewels; rings, chains, breastpins, ear-drops, and a magnificent watch inlaid richly—in all aggregating, had they been realized upon, many thousands of dollars.

A plain suit was brought from the wardrobe and spread upon the luxurious bed in complete readiness for donning.

Then she locked all the doors leading to her apartments.

While these significant movements were in progress, Harry Hound was sitting in the library coolly smoking a cigar and glancing over the columns of a newspaper.

To all appearances he was as idle, as careless of the business on his hands, as if there had been nothing pending or nothing further to do.

But the brain of the detective was far from being idle. While seemingly interested in the newspaper paragraphs, he was thinking out an extraordinary project.

Extraordinary, daring and highly perilous.

He knew that Percy Desmond meant to strike an early blow at his life.

It may astonish the reader to learn that this famous man was actually planning to give Desmond precisely the opportunity for the experiment!

The fact of his returning to the Arday mansion in the character of Royal Arday, knowing that his disguise had been penetrated by the plotters, was a part of this very plan.

The whole afternoon passed. He declined the summons to dinner, having taken a hasty snack after leaving Clyde cottage.

Harry was usually a quick thinker and a quicker actor; but on this occasion the shades of evening were settling in the room where he sat, and still he had not decided upon a method for giving Desmond a chance to attempt his life, without exciting the adventurer's suspicions of a counter-trap.

It was quite dark when the front bell rung and a servant announced Mr. Charles Courtley to see Mr. Royal.

The Hound descended to meet him.

"Royal, old fellow," saluted Desmond cordially, "I fear you are getting altogether too seriously low-spirited over this trouble."

"How can I help it, Charlie?"

"But, then, have hopes."

"Hopes are very small with me."

"The best detectives are searching for some clew to your father."

"They are," rejoined Harry, scarcely able to avoid giving the words a significant inflection.

It was a very queer play going on between these two.

"I thought a saunter to-night would do you good, and have come to offer my company."

"Very acceptable. I believe you are right. I must do something to divert my mind from brooding on the calamity to my father."

"Yes, cheer up."

"I will try to."

"Come along, then. Perhaps a little trial at cards or faro will prove amusing."

As the detective made a change of coats and took a hat from the rack in a niche at the rear of the hall, he adroitly disarranged the side-whiskers which so materially contributed in his resemblance to Royal Arday.

This was meant for the villain's special notice.

Desmond turned partly aside to conceal a devilish look of triumph. He thought the "give away" action was purely accidental.

The bold adventurer was now sure of his intended victim.

Desperate indeed were the chances being assumed by the venturesome detective.

"Well, which way, Charlie?" he inquired, as they left the house.

"What do you say to a trial of luck?"

"I really do not feel like playing."

"Look on, then."

"All right."

They started for the saloon on Custom-house street.

As they entered that street an unforeseen event transpired.

A small-statured man stepped suddenly up to them, and laying his hand on the detective's shoulder, said, in a sharp, business way:

"Royal Ardway, you're 'wanted.'"

The two stopped in surprise.

"I am wanted?"

"You are."

"By whom?"

"The law."

"For what?"

"You must save your catechism until you get to head-quarters."

"You intend to arrest me?"

"That is my duty just now."

"You are an officer?"

"Yes," displaying a detective's badge.

Harry saw in an instant exactly what this meant.

For some new reason the police deemed it advisable to take Royal Ardway into custody. There must have been some further development of the hint given by the hooded and mysterious female to the patrolman on the night of the tragedy. The police lieutenant was at the bottom of this move.

"I think you have made a mistake, my man."

"Not much."

"I have done nothing to merit this intrusive insult."

"Of course not," joined Desmond, emphatically.

"I know my business, and I have my orders," declared the man. "Come—shall I run you in quietly, or are you going to make a row?"

"There is no necessity for a row."

"Come ahead with me, then."

"Won't you state what I am arrested for?"

Harry was weighing as to a course of action, and dallied to gain time.

"It's not my business to explain whys and wherefores when I arrest a man."

"But you can surely tell me—"

"You come along immediately or I'll blow my call for police aid."

As he said this, the man fastened a strong gripe on his prisoner's arm.

There was now a singular condition of things.

The "shadow," of course, had due authority to arrest Royal Ardway, or he would not have come forward so boldly. Desmond did not wish the disguised detective to be arrested; at that very moment there existed a deep laid plot for the latter's assassination. Already Desmond had begun to congratulate himself that he would soon and forever be rid of The Hound. Harry could not afford to undergo an arrest because he wanted the attempt upon his life to occur, and believed that to be the object of the arch-villain's calling for him at the mansion; at the station his real identity must come out, and the only thing accomplished would be a loss of time that was valuable to him.

He was vexed, even angry, that this man—innocently and well-meaning enough—should be thus deliberately interfering with his plan of operations.

He made up his mind to a decidedly belligerent course.

The action of the officer, in taking hold upon the arm of the man he believed to be Royal Ardway, hastened a surprising climax.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STROKE OF THE BLACK-JACK.

THE party who was undertaking this arrest was the same "shadow" who had been on the track of Royal Ardway for some days.

As Harry had supposed—when we have seen him cleverly and easily elude the pursuit after his first visit to the Clydes—he was not a regular officer, but one of those adjuncts to the detective service whose specialty is more to trail and watch the movements of suspected persons.

He was neither long experienced in his vocation nor very familiar with the sly ins and outs of that particular locality, as the closely subsequent result of this occasion proved.

The Hound had instantly resolved to "down" the man as his only quick method of escape. Still he hesitated, not liking to harm a brother professional, when the latter was simply discharging a duty.

"Remove your hand, sir!" he commanded, sharply.

"Oh, no! I think you are disposed to be ugly."

"I warn you!"

"What will happen if I don't heed, hey?"

"I make no threats."

"You seem to mean it, though. Will you promise to come peaceably?"

"I make no promises."

"Then I guess I'd better hold on. Come."

"Remove your hand!"

There was a menace in the second warning that could not be mistaken.

"See here, I don't want any trouble with you."

"Then remove your hand from my arm."

It was a third warning.

"Instead of doing that I guess I'd better hold on tighter. You just come right along with me now, Mr. Royal Ardway, or—"

His speech was cut short in a rather terrific way.

The powerful right arm of Harry Hound shot out straight from the shoulder, and with the startling quickness of a bursted clock-spring.

There was a dull, thudding sound of knuckles on flesh and bone. The man went head over heels, nearly performing a somersault, falling flat on the pavement, and for about a quarter of a minute his vision was a confused maelstrom of stars and flamy blurrings.

When he recovered sufficiently to scramble up he was entirely alone. He hastened to the well-known saloon at the corner, scouting vainly here and there in search of his escaped game. But he was completely outwitted.

"I guess the next time I get my hand on that young man I'll do well to have some assistance," he concluded, in his chagrin.

Immediately upon knocking down the "shadow" Harry ran into a long, dark, narrow entryway close by, Desmond following.

"Good!" indorsed the latter. "That was a crack deserving admiration. You are up in the manly art, I see."

In truth, he was surprised at the masterly stroke. It gave him some further insight of the other's prowess.

"If you had not struck him, Royal, I would."

"I really did not want to hit him."

"There was no help for it."

"It seems not."

"You did perfectly right. The idea! What does anybody want to arrest you for?"

"Don't know, I'm sure."

At the far rear of the entry there was a door; beyond the door another passage; then a flight of stairs; at the head of the stairs a second door, where a neatly-attired usher admitted them to a set of magnificent and costly parlors.

Although so very early in the evening, several quiet games were in progress—the *salon* being not devoted to the votaries of the green baize exclusively, but having a number of private tables in alcoves, upholstered in a style of fairy-like extravagance.

"So you won't play to-night?" half-banterd Desmond.

"No, I think not."

"It might prove interesting after a few ventures."

"Excuse me."

Harry had never played a card in his life in any other way than for mere amusement. And, too, he was now playing a different sort of game, so deep, so hazardous, that he could not afford to engage his mind with anything calculated to throw him off his guard.

He could not foresee in what way or at what instant the attack upon him was to be made. One second of inattention to himself might cost him his life.

Desmond plunged at once into the faro deal. Judging by his display of abundant money, the detective concluded that he must have succeeded in realizing on the stolen diamonds.

For there are numerous ways of raising money *sub silentio* in New Orleans without recourse to the pawnbrokers; and many an article of plunder might be traced to singular haunts in Duphine and Burgundy streets.

For nearly two hours the detective remained a looker-on in the gambling parlors.

Desmond seemed to be solely engrossed by the cards and their dealer.

There was apparently nothing in this feature of the evening to suggest a lurking plot of murder.

Such inactivity did not suit the detective. He became restless.

"Guess I'll be going, Charlie."

"What! are you off?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is tiresome when one isn't playing."

"Are you coming with me?"

"No, I think I'll remain. I'm in luck to-night."

For a second Harry Hound was puzzled by this reply. A second only—then it flashed upon him that Desmond did not intend himself to aim the murderous blow. His tools—some of the Owlsh crew—were to commit the assassin deed.

Fully satisfied of this, fully prepared as he felt the climax almost at hand, and seeking to force the issue, he passed out of the saloon.

Hardly had he taken a dozen steps when his surmise was verified.

Forward from the gloom sprang two men, one on each side of him. In their hands were poised the deadly sand-clubs.

Powerful ruffians they were; murder their intent.

But the assailants met with a stern surprise.

Right and left—and only once each way—swept the detective's arm.

In his tight fist was grasped the terrible black-jack.

Two blows only he struck—they were enough; these delivered with a scientific precision, the irresistible cunning of a master hand.

There were two dull, cracking, thumping sounds, and two figures, as if suddenly shot, dropped limply to the pavement.

Not a word had been spoken. The thrilling incident was over in a moment.

The intended victim was safely gone from the spot.

A man ran forward from the entrance to the gambling-saloon.

It was Desmond. He must have been close and stealthily following when the supposed-to-be-doomed detective emerged.

Kneeling by a prostrate form he lighted a match. He was eager to behold the dreaded face of Harry Hound in death.

Then an ejaculation of astonishment and rage burst from him.

The fellow was one of the would-be assassins. He was recovering and gave vent to several painful groans.

Desmond shook the man angrily.

"Where is he, you botch?"

"Who?" confusedly.

"The man you and Josh were to lay out."

"Cap'n Percy, the cove's a stunner."

"So it seems," sneeringly. "Did he escape unharmed from you two?"

"Ask Josh. I'm kinder 'bout uncertain 'bout the cranium, I am."

"I don't believe you so much as touched him."

"Blest if I know what Josh's done. I didn't git a lick into 'im myself, afore somethin' just took me 'side o' the jaw, an'—an'—burned if I don't b'lieve the whole cheek o' my face 's busted."

"This almost looks as if he was ready for you," said Desmond, with a sudden suspicion.

"He was cer—tain—ly ready, don't you forget."

"Do you know who it is you have allowed to escape?"

"Didn't 'pear to me to be a question of 'low-ance, Cap; 'e just took his own sort o' way 'bout it. Who was the chap, anyhow?"

"You won't feel any easier when I tell you."

"Who was he?"

"The Hound."

"No!"

"Sure as you're laying there. And I suspect he is after The Owls."

Desmond arose from his kneeling position, and walked a short distance along the pavement, looking around as he went; then he moved in a similar way out and back on the street.

"Where's Josh at?" half blubbered the recovered assassin, coming up slowly and holding one hand to his face, where the black-jack had cut both flesh and bone.

"That is what I am looking for. What can have become of him?"

The two searched around for awhile, but nothing was to be seen of the other ruffian.

Why should he have deserted his companion? The detective had disappeared; so had the fellow named Josh.

Undreamed-of by the evil pair who lingered in Custom-house street, Harry Hound had performed a singular feat after "downing" those who had assaulted him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE OWLS IN DURESS.

THE feat that followed The Hound's rapid and summary demolition of the plot against his life by Desmond's cut-throat coadjutors was the impulse of an idea that flashed into his brain even as he dealt those stunning blows with the terrible black-jack.

A thorough master in the handling of the weapon, he knew precisely how and where to hit to inflict severe punishment and produce insensibility, complete though not fatal.

We have said that he was a quick thinker and actor. The scope of his thoughts and the plan conceived in that one transient moment were something remarkable.

Springing to one of the prostrate ruffians, in a trice he grasped him up, slinging the limp body, like a bag of meal, over his shoulder. The ease and celerity of this performance showed the wonderful strength of the detective athlete.

With his burden firmly held, he sped swiftly from Custom-house street, making for a near hack-stand.

Rushing forward, and shoving the insensible man into a vehicle before the astonished cabman could open his mouth, he jumped in himself and cried:

"Drive to the — station-house. Whip up your horses!"

Had cabby been inclined to object to what had a strong appearance of being some kind of foul play, the order to drive direct to a police-station at once disabused his mind of the suspicion.

He climbed to his box and started his horses at a lively gait, without exchanging a word with his singular customer.

The Hound's order would deliver him at the station nearest to the precinct in which was the Ardway mansion.

He was about to make a new play in the game. As he rode along he removed the disguise.

Arrived at the station, he only paused long enough to give the driver a liberal fee and discharge him, then hurried inside with the human burden, still unconscious, in his arms.

Both the night-captain and lieutenant chanced to be present. This was exactly what he had hoped for.

"Hello, Mr. Hound! what have you there?" demanded the captain.

"I should say a dead man," ventured the lieutenant.

"No, he is not dead, gentlemen. An important witness in the Ardway case that I was lucky enough to capture."

The lieutenant was particularly interested at this announcement.

"Please let me have a couch to spread the fellow on. And perhaps it will be as well to call he doctor," Harry urged.

In a side room the captive was deposited upon a bed.

"I hardly think we'll need a doctor," remarked the lieutenant, who had considerable experience with ugly wounds. "Struck him with a billy, eh?"

"Yes."

"There's no actual fracture of bones. Sponge water and linen will repair him."

By the time the ruffian's ugly phiz was washed and bandaged, he had recovered and was gazing a little stupidly at those around him.

"How do you begin to feel?" inquired the detective, with a grim smile.

"Feel's if I was all mashed to pieces, that's how."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Looks like it was a station-house."

"You are a good guesser."

"Am I 'brought in'?"

"Just that."

"An' where's the feller w'ot—" he checked himself.

"You mean the man you wanted to kill?"

"I wasn't a-tryin' to kill nobody."

"Oh, yes, you were."

"Swear to 'mighty I wasn't. Some galoot tackled onto me, an'—"

"Hold on, my friend. I'm the man you attacked on Custom-house street."

"You!"

"The very one."

"Oh, nary."

"Not a bit of mistake, I assure you. I guess I remember laying out you and your pal. You see, I was on the lookout for your little game. I was dressed up to look like the man you meant to kill. See the point?"

"Who are you?"

"People in your peculiar scale of society call me 'The Hound.'"

"That settles it."

"It does, eh?"

"I mout 'a' know'd it."

"Known it—what?"

"Better 'n to tackle you. Who'd 'a' thort—But the jig's up, I reckon."

"It is, indeed. You are one of those who will have to help pay the fiddler. I shall soon have the rest of The Owls caged."

"What do you know about Owls?"

"Enough to trap them, as you will admit. Captain—"

He turned around to the officer and said something hurriedly in a whisper.

"Certainly, Mr. Hound—all right."

"Come, get up and trot," ordered the detective, turning again to the bandaged and sore-headed ruffian.

The command was obeyed with the slow cautiousness of one who has some uncertainty as to the wholeness of his limbs.

The turnkey took hold upon his charge, leading him away, and was followed by Harry Hound.

A minute later the prisoner was thrust into a cell, and in the same minute he exclaimed, in the tone of one who encounters an old acquaintance:

"Hello, Cracker Bill! what are you a-doin' here?"

Then sounded the voice of the boss alligator from Florida:

"Say—you jackass fool! Ain't you got no sense?"

"Sense!—why?"

"W'ot do you mean, givin' away a pal in that sort o' style? You orter be slam down the gullet of a old she-crockerdile, you ort!"

"Why, where's the harm when you an' me'r both in fur it?"

What further the boss alligator might have said, or growled, was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Harry Hound, who had remained out of sight. His face was beaming shrewdly.

"Turnkey, give this man another cell. Lock me in here and return in twenty minutes."

The new prisoner was forthwith marched out. The detective turned smilingly upon the tangled-haired giant.

"Well, Mr. Cracker Bill, my little trick worked to a dot."

"Say—you're just too smart to live long, you are."

"Maybe so"

"I kin see what you're drivin' at."

"So? You admit, then, that I've got a new point on you."

"Mit nothin'," surlily.

"Come, now, my delectable boss alligator, we must understand each other. You played your part first-class when I last saw you."

"Didn't play no part at all."

"I think you did."

"Hope to die if I did."

"Whether you did or not, we'll have things fixed straight between us now, or you may depend I'll have you hung yet."

Bill gave his unkempt head a dogged shake.

"Here is the case in a nutshell," pursued the detective. "In the city of New Orleans there is a gang of scoundrels calling themselves The Owls. They plunder when they can, kill when they choose. This gang murdered a gentleman named Girard Ardway. They buried a young and beautiful girl alive. I saved the girl; she gave me a reliable description of the wretch who trapped her at the levee some days ago, and also of the fellow who drove her and the villain in a cab to a house on Franklin street. The abductor I know; the driver I recognize as my companion at this moment—you, Cracker Bill. Now, just stop to consider—be a sensible rogue; I have captured one of the gang—the fellow in here a minute since; by what passed between you, I can see that you two are of the same crew—"

"Josh war a ornery fool!"

"Listen. The chief Owl of all, Percy Desmond, I can put my gripe on at any instant I choose. I have sufficient evidence to send the whole of you 'up' for a number of years at hard labor and hang those connected with the Ardway affair. You are not fond of hard labor, I imagine."

Cracker Bill sat looking down at the floor of his cell, listening thoughtfully and scratching his head.

"Say—w'ot do you want out o' me, anyway?" he blurted forth, at last, and at the end of a long breath.

"I want a clean breast, State's evidence."

"An' w'ot do I get fur it?"

"A very light punishment, if any."

Bill paused to ponder on this.

He knew he was in a corner, but, unlike the proverbial rat, there was no fight in him. The mention of Percy Desmond as leader of The Owls, settled it in his mind that the detective had matters down fine and there could be very little use in trifling bravado.

Be it said for him, his previous story regarding the manner in which he had obtained the tell-tale diamond that led to his arrest, was true. He was in ignorance of the tragedy within the Ardway mansion until informed of it by the detective.

But he was a member of the owlish organization, was already in the toils of the law, when the work of the detective culminated in the nabbing and trial of the whole gang, Cracker Bill could hardly avoid prominence as companion in guilt. Perhaps in the uncertain intricacies of a court, they would connect him directly with the Ardway murder. Such prospects had a decidedly weakening influence.

He resolved to betray the burglarious brotherhood out and out.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A CAPTURE AT THE LAKE.

THE HOUND coolly awaited to hear the decision he knew was sure to come.

He had gauged the character of his man pretty correctly.

"Cap, you've got me!" exclaimed Bill.

"In a hole, eh?"

"Y-a-a-s."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"There don't 'pear to me to be a openin' for craw-fishin'."

"Not a slide, my boss alligator."

"You want me to turn State's evidence?"

"It is your last chance."

"F I tell you all w'ot I know, I'm a-goin' to be let down easy, am I?"

"Yes."

"No foolin'?"

"You have my honest promise."

"You're right 'bout them Owls—"

"Oh, I know that already."

"An' Cap, I'm one of 'em."

"How many in the gang altogether?" interrogated the detective.

"That's the way—you just come on with the questions and I'll open the thing out square. There's 'bout six of us—on'y six, or hope to die."

"Where is the rendezvous?"

"The rendezvous are on a island in Lake Borgne."

"What island?"

"There's the p'int. 'Tain't got no name. Lies kinder out from the ma'sh like, where there's a big sort o' a two-j'inted smooth rock."

"How else can it be identified?"

"A log cabin is built on to it, an' nothink else—"

"That will do."

"Do?"

"I know the island."

"Reckon there's a heap o' plunder inside o' that cabin what you detec' chaps 'll be glad to come acrost," said Bill, with a mysterious nod of his shaggy locks.

"Lots on hand, eh? How did you happen to be so down at the heel, then, when you were caught?"

"Why, d'you see, we only divides onc't a month."

"Oh, is that the way of it? Your leader has some system, then?"

"Cap, how'd you learn 'bout Percy Desmond bein' the boss Owl?"

The detective's eyes glistened. Though pretty sure of Desmond, it required just this little speech from Cracker Bill to confirm his suspicions.

"Why, a little bird—"

"Say, I ain't no fool."

Harry Hound laughed.

"Now, Cap, a-nother thing. Maybe it mout be vallyble to you to know 'at this night are a meetin' night. 'F I wasn't jugged in here I'd be there when the boss Owl rapped, to claim my share out o' the sale o' bobs."

The detective arose quickly on hearing this. He well knew the almost deserted island alluded to by Cracker Bill. The announcement that the Owlsh crew were to hold a meeting there that very night aroused him to the urgency of immediate action. Now was the time to strike.

"Say—w'ot are you going to do? Don't you want to know any more'n that little bit?" Bill demanded.

"Is there much more to tell?"

"I should grin?"

"Well, it will keep. You save it for me."

"You're a-goin' to scoop the rest of my pards, ain't you?"

"That's exactly my intention at present."

"Don't let 'em know 'at I give it away."

Harry abruptly left the cell and the station. He went direct to detective headquarters. Luckily for his object he found his chief there.

A rather brief, low-toned conversation ensued between the two.

At the expiration of half an hour Harry hurried away from the Agency. Hailing a cab, he gave the driver orders which soon delivered him at the cottage of the Clydes.

His visit here was short and of a surprising character to Mrs. Clyde and Isabel.

Still retaining the conveyance, he next sought a store, where he purchased a small supply of provisions and wine, and with these in his arms arrived at the house on Baronne street, where Royal Ardway was in seclusion.

"Your term of imprisonment will expire tomorrow," he said, sociably, to the young man.

"I am heartily glad to hear it, I declare."

"Now listen to me. To-morrow morning you will have a dangerous part to play, and I must put you thoroughly on your guard."

He proceeded to relate the existing plot against Royal Ardway's life, giving the true character and part history of the beautiful impostor who had assumed the name of Edna Crystol, exposing, at the same time, the villany of Percy Desmond—Charles Courtley—the reputed scion of a good and wealthy family.

The whole was startling information to Royal.

Then followed a few very explicit instructions for the morrow.

Leaving the young man, our busy detective ordered his driver to the Louisville & Nashville Depot.

"And be smart about it!" he cried, urgently.

By the time he reached the head of Canal street he had but a few seconds in which to catch the outgoing accommodation; hardly had his feet touched the car steps when the engine belled and puffed forward on its route.

And while Harry sped thus away upon a hurried mission, he had left a very important piece of business behind for his chief to attend to.

The clocks were pointing toward late at night when a number of shadowy forms began concentrating toward that spot in the marsh which Cracker Bill had indicated by a "big sort o' a two-j'inted smooth rock." The water made an inway through the weedy, wet herbage, affording a landing for a small bateau; and such a craft, capable of holding half a dozen men was moored to the spongy shore.

The night was still and starry; excepting the whispering breathings of lonely nature, or a stray gleaming light out on the glassy Borgne, there was an absence of life fairly palpable.

The shadowy forms came singly at intervals, sinking noiselessly out of sight.

As the hour verged on twelve, midnight, three new and different figures, stealthily as huge, erect cats, and walking swiftly, approached in single file along an almost imperceptible path.

Silent as the specters they resembled, they advanced to the boat, and one stooped to take the mooring padlock from its stout chain in an old log.

While the operation was being performed, out on the stilly air sounded, from the throat of one of the others, the mournful tewyt-oo hoo of an owl, as if in signal to some possibly lurking companions.

The signal was answered in a way that immensely astonished the trio.

In a semicircle around them, uprose a cordon

of stalwart men, and on the breast of each man, though dim the light of the stars, could be discerned the polished badges of the city police.

Uprose and advanced quickly, this sudden force, and ere the three at the water's edge could run or resist, they were grasped to helplessness by the vise hands of the law.

"Three!" spoke a voice recognizable as that of the chief detective of New Orleans City Police. "That's the right count. Harry has two in jail, and his eye on the leader in case we did not catch him here. March them along. And a couple of you go out to the island and report what's there."

Three ruffian voices were growling in rageful oaths, and had to be half-dragged away.

When searched at the station, the pockets of each were found to contain black gloves and an ingenious mask patterned after the preying bird of night. Under the coat, around the waist of each, was a domino of some light-weighted and sable fabric. Provided thus, they could assume the garb in less than half a minute.

It was a bad night for Owls!

But we follow The Hound.

He alighted at a little village, after riding a few miles. With the exception of a tavern crew near the railroad, the inhabitants were abed and slumbering.

He made his way along the main and gloomy street to its extreme terminus, and paused before a frame dwelling.

Rapping sharply on the door, he was admitted by no less a personage than Silas Margrip.

"Eb—hey!" exclaimed the lawyer. "You, Mr. Hound?"

"Not my ghost, I guess."

"What a surprise. Ah! I see. Some *coup de main*, eh? Come in, sir—come in. What's in the wind?"

Silas sniffed as if he scented something exciting.

"I am about to close in on my game," said the detective.

"Good—good! *Decidunt turre*!"

Silas rubbed his eely fingers in and out with the pleasurable anticipation of bringing rogues to justice.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

"I SHALL want you to be on hand at the Ardway mansion in the morning, Mr. Margrip," the detective continued. "In fact, you had better go in to the city with me."

"But, why not have telegraphed and saved yourself so much trouble?"

"That wouldn't do, for many reasons. I passed the telegraph office, too, coming up the street, and observed that it was closed, so you see you could not have received a message from me to night. Besides, I want a little talk with you. Having been mixed up in the Ardway matter of late, it may be as well that you should be the one to search out the proofs of Martha Crystol's identity. I visited her this evening, and she expressed such a wish, giving me these papers and a list of prominent parties in Tennessee who knew both her and her husband."

He gave the lawyer a small package. Then ensued a lengthy conversation between the two.

Harry Hound had prepared a magazine for explosion on the morrow.

As there was no stopping train for the city until after daylight, the detective availed of the interval to get a little sleep, and threw himself on a lounge in the room when through talking with the lawyer.

In the early morning, before the streets were thronging, The Hound and Margrip entered the city and went direct to the Ardway mansion.

They were admitted by Royal, who appeared to have been expecting them.

"What about the police?" The Hound questioned.

"They are here."

"Good. Then it won't be long before we nab our man."

Hardly had the three entered the parlor, when a cab came whirling up to the curb, and a young lady alighted in great haste, almost running as she ascended the steps.

It was Clarice Ardway, who had just arrived from Baltimore, having traveled day and night after receipt of the alarming telegram from her brother.

Royal went to the door to admit her.

In a tremble of dread she threw herself upon his breast, crying:

"Oh, brother! what is it—tell me?"

"Be calm, Clarice—"

"I can not be calm. Oh! the misery of mind I have endured coming here."

"Let us go into the parlor."

They entered where the detective and lawyer had remained.

Seeing who the young lady was, and her almost hysterical condition, Harry stepped to the young man's side, and whispered a few words in his ear.

Royal partially recoiled. His face expressed a boundless amazement.

"You are not jesting?" he gasped.

"Not a particle. We'll leave you with your sister, and I guess, now, you can quiet all her fears."

"Heaven be praised!—yes. You are a wonderful man!"

"Oh, never mind about that at present. Come, Mr. Margrip."

Harry led the lawyer to the library, and left him there. He then walked in the direction of the bedroom where had occurred the tragedy of our early chapter.

Royal, himself in a state of mind bewildered, related to his sister a remarkable story. And it was while brother and sister were thus engaged, that the door-bell rung, announcing a visitor.

Royal answered the ring.

The caller was Percy Desmond.

His mind was made up that The Hound must die, and his knowledge with him. There was murder in his thoughts as he grasped Royal's hand with hypocritical cordiality.

Then a quick start passed over him. His searching gaze discovered that the side-whiskers were genuine; and there were other points revealing that it was really Royal Ardway who faced him.

"Why, Charlie, glad to see you! Come in; I've a surprise for you."

"Ah?"

Royal was playing his part according to the detective's instructions.

"I understood you to say you had a previous acquaintance with Clarice?"

"Yes."

"She has arrived."

"Indeed?"

"In the parlor now. Walk right in."

Desmond seemed to experience a sense of danger in the perfectly quiet atmosphere of the mansion. He half-hesitated, as if he would turn and leave with some abrupt excuse.

But Royal was gently leading him by the arm, and he presently stood before Clarice, whose recent perturbation had entirely vanished.

Evidently, by the exchange of address between the handsome adventurer and Clarice Ardway, they had met before; evidently, too, she was in complete ignorance of the true character of the man, for her greeting was highly pleasant.

With but the exchange of a few commonplace remarks—ignoring the subject which had brought Clarice so suddenly to New Orleans—and without having seated himself at all, he excused himself from further intrusion upon brother and sister.

"I shall do myself the honor to call soon again and often, if I may be permitted, Miss Ardway," he said.

"Do so, Mr. Courtley. I remember that our acquaintance in Baltimore was very enjoyable to me; it would be pleasant to renew it here. I shall not return to the academy."

"Thank you. Good-day."

The Prince advanced toward the door, Royal following as if to accompany him through the hall.

Hardly had he taken six steps when a thrilling event transpired.

"Halt!" sounded a stern voice.

Hank Hound stood in the doorway, one hand outstretched commandingly. Behind the detective "dressed" two stalwart, uniformed policemen.

Desmond did halt. A transient terror widened his eyes.

Then his bold effrontery asserted itself.

"Well, sir, who are you?—and what does this mean, I would like to know?"

"It means that you are my prisoner, sir."

"Prisoner! What am I arrested for, pray?"

"Abduction and attempted murder, and complicity in some of the heaviest burglaries that have been committed in New Orleans for many years, to say nothing of a daring perpetration of fraud. Sufficient charges, are they not? Hold out your wrists—"

"Stop!"

Desmond retreated before an advancing policeman who rattled the "dabies" in readiness to place them on the culprit.

"This is a most unpleasant mistake. You are deucedly wrong in these charges."

"Am I? Let Miss Louie Crystol speak for herself."

At the words the curtains of the alcove were pushed aside and the beautiful victim of the Voodoo sorcery stood before him.

It was, to him, indeed like an apparition from the grave.

"You see, Prince Desmond, I am not doing my work by halves. I hold you for deliberately and murderously *burying that young girl alive*! More, you have to answer for the monstrous attempt to stab to death Girard Ardway."

"It's a lie! Who dares say I did such a thing?"

"I do!" answered a deep, accusing voice.

Again the curtains parted, and into the room slowly stepped Girard Ardway.

He was wan and weak, his once genial face painfully emaciated and his ordinarily robust frame shockingly reduced even in those few days since we last saw him in all health and vigor.

Nevertheless, it was Girard Ardway in the living flesh, standing there to hurl confusion on the quaking villain.

"My father! Oh, thank God!" burst from Royal, rushing toward him with arms outstretched for an embrace of joy.

"Ah, Royal, my son, it is a miracle of Heaven that you see me here—a miracle worked through the wonderful detective skill of Mr. Hound, whom may God forever bless! Look!"—leveling a quivering finger at Desmond.

"Look upon that vile semblance of a man—that thief, ghoul, assassin! In the dead hour of night he came to my bedside and struck with a fiend's hand at my life. I succeeded in grappling with him, and in our struggle I tore from his face the mask of an owl which he wore. Twice, thrice his keen knife entered my flesh, and when he thought me a corpse, unable to name him to others, he dragged me into a secret passage. To make further sure, he fairly wrapped me in knotted bonds and tied a gag in my mouth. It was no doubt his intention to return for me at some more convenient time, and consign my body to an unknown grave. But God, in His mercy, had not willed this terrible thing. I recovered, and oh! the misery, the unspeakable torture I endured, lying there helplessly, writhing until unconsciousness—which I prayed might be death for relief—came again upon me. When next I knew that I lived, this brave detective was at my side; I was lying in my own bed. I suffered more from those hours of torture than from my wounds, for none of these were dangerous, and had almost stanching themselves. Bear witness all, I charge that wretch with this assassin deed!"

"Hold out your wrists!" sounded the stern voice of The Hound.

The officers advanced to take their prisoner. But Desmond lived ever prepared for such a crisis.

Quickly he drew from his pocket a tiny vial that could not have contained more than fifty drops of a clear liquid.

Ere a hand could grasp him he thrust the vial into his mouth and his teeth crunched down on the thin glass.

"There! let us see you take me!" he cried.

"I defy you all!"

They were the last words he ever uttered.

In a few minutes he was a corpse.

From the remnants of the vial, which had been ejected on the floor, one of the policemen drew forth a label which read, "Prussic acid."

It was a solemn tableau that formed about the body of the bold suicide.

And in the background had suddenly appeared Trim Tasker, the *Picayune* reporter, his pencil flying over his tablets with lightning rapidity.

"What of the beautiful impostor who was this man's accomplice in crime?" asked Girard Ardway, first to break the awesome silence.

"I have learned from Josette, her maid, that she mysteriously departed last night," replied the detective. "Let the poor thing go, I say. She has perhaps learned a lesson which will keep her out of such tricks in the future. It would probably cost more than it is worth to catch and punish her."

Of the scheming Lucy Crystol nothing was afterward heard.

"And where is the real Edna Crystol?"

"She and her mother will visit you to-day."

"I have a warm place in my heart for both. And this unfortunate young lady"—turning to Louie—"I shall make up to her for all her suffering. Her too I shall try and induce to become my ward and—"

But Harry astonished all by an interruption. Stepping to Louie's side, he took one of her hands, saying:

"Pardon, Mr. Ardway, but I object to that part of the programme. Please accept the young lady's thanks through me. But, as I saved Louie's life, I intend assuming entire charge of her heart also, and—we shall be glad to have you at the wedding."

It was totally unexpected to the young girl. But this quickest of all strange courtships resulted in happiness to both.

The grandest of grand weddings known to the elite of New Orleans—a double wedding—was celebrated at the Ardway mansion before the advent of winter.

Royal and his Isabel—whose real name, Edna, could never become familiar to his lips—and The Hound, with his beautiful betrothed, Louie Crystol, were wedded simultaneously, and the four started in company upon one of the most delightful of honeymoons.

Silas Margrip duly found fully satisfactory proofs of Martha Crystol's identity, and when the brides and bridegrooms returned, they learned that Girard Ardway had wooed and won the widow of his early friend, and another wedding had been fixed for a not distant day.

The Owls met with the usual punishment meted to such burglarious classes, and Cracker Bill was "let down easy" according to the detective's promise.

The drama that had opened with such a phase of terrible tragedy had all come right at last, and general happiness, and magnificent reward, crowned this last case in the diary of the famous Detective Hank Hound.

THE END.

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